



Analogue Africa

NOTES ON THE ANTI-COLONIAL IMAGINATION

Jeremy Harding



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Introduction

This book is a homage to a handful of filmmakers, photographers, artists and writers whose works address the colonial question in sub-Saharan Africa and the Maghreb, but also in Europe, where anti-colonialism gained a foothold among metropolitan intellectuals in the 1930s and 1940s. All the pieces here touch on colonialism and the colonial legacy, including the postcolonial equivocations of European museums in the twenty-first century. In Africa, the European colonial project – expressed in its final phase as white minority rule – was done and dusted by the mid-1990s. Yet as I try to suggest in these essays, colonialism is neither a closed story nor simply a precursor of neo-colonialism: if it were, it would no longer be under discussion in an urgent present tense, and the anti-colonial imagination, like the scientific imagination that enabled the steam age, would be a specialist topic for historians. Instead, it has become an instrumental reference, along with slavery, in a fierce vernacular debate about anti-African racism – and racism in general. Colonialism has a stubborn historical persistence, despite the attrition of time and the fickleness of memory. Whether in the arts or the human sciences, African or non-African, works that engage with it – the works I praise here – have a similar, antithetical resilience. And they open onto a world of parallel information, often more rewarding than journalists' copy filed from the continent in the late-colonial era.

The essays that follow offer a brisk, selective glimpse of the anti-colonial imagination. Most were written to commission, one assignment at a time. They are reorganised here by theme, and this introduction, I hope, lays out a route map for readers to follow. All touch closely on a period when African values and aspirations were available to the rest of the world through ambiguous intermediaries: European ethnographers; keepers of African art collections in the West; superpower rivals throwing their weight around in Africa; and overseas news conglomerates with a network of foreign

correspondents that covered the continent. My larger hope is to celebrate the ingenuity with which African artists challenged the colonial order on their own terms.

The first stop, then, is the colonial endeavour itself. The opening essay follows a majestic French ethnological expedition that set off in the 1930s from Dakar, in present-day Senegal, to Djibouti at the southern edge of the Red Sea. Our guide on this journey, which took nearly two years, is the French writer and ethnographer Michel Leiris. He was deeply troubled by the project and his own part in it. In the diaries he kept at the time, both are examined ruthlessly – and distorted by a grotesque convexity – in the mirror of colonialism. Leiris, who became a staunch anti-colonialist, is intrigued by the grimy underside of colonial anthropology, including theft: Marcel Griaule, the head of the mission, could rob a shrine of its ceremonial objects with the skill of a fox in a hencoop. Several of the artefacts he pilfered can now be found in the Musée du Quai Branly.

Like statuary, museums force us into debates about the colonial past and its long afterlife in the postcolonial present. The British Museum in London, the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris and the AfricaMuseum in Belgium are the subjects of three pieces here. These brisk visitors' guides look for evidence of the anti-colonial imagination in spaces shaped by colonial rule, where stolen artefacts like Griaule's are on display or languishing in storage – and cherished by descendants of the people from whom they were taken, often by force. The British Museum's collection of Benin bronzes once performed a dual role, as sacred ancestral objects and political guarantees of the royal lineage in Benin City. Today they have recovered their earlier agency as exiled advocates for restitution, reanimated by new versions of the sacred and a new postcolonial politics. We sense their patience in detention when we look at them in museums in Europe and the US.

The British Museum is an impressive ice field laid down by centuries of imperial acquisition, whose surface is sweating in the heat of debate about reparations and the return of artefacts. Built on the site of a mansion in Bloomsbury and based on a private collection amassed by the son of a colonial tax collector in seventeenth-century Ireland, the BM has undertaken an uneasy reappraisal of its holdings.

Quai Branly, which opened in 2006, houses hundreds of exquisite pieces, mostly from France's former colonies, but the building has troubling

elements of pseudo-tropical pastiche which detract from the grace of the exhibits. The architect Jean Nouvel's design for Quai Branly resembles an updated version of Berthold Lubetkin's gorilla house at London Zoo, built in the 1930s while the Dakar–Djibouti expedition was pilfering its way across the Sahel.

The Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, on the outskirts of Brussels, opened in the 1890s. Belgium relinquished Congo in 1960. For decades the museum stood its ground as a racist simulacrum of King Leopold II's private domain in central Africa, where the skulls of defeated anticolonial rebels were on show alongside vulgar statuary depicting the muscular African and his capable European conquerors. Leopold handed over his private holding in the Congo to the Belgian state in 1908, which continued adding to the collections for another thirty years. They include a priceless collection of masks, 6 million insect specimens and an array of stuffed animals that speak to the subjugation of nature – and, by implication, of nature's most troublesome species: the Indigenous peoples of Congo.

In 2013 the museum embarked on an ambitious renovation. When it reopened five years later visitors were invited on a historicised tour of its holdings. Several African artists, including the painter Chéri Samba and the sculptor Freddy Tsimba (both from the Democratic Republic of Congo), were drafted in for the 'decolonisation' process. Their works go head-to-head with the vestiges of King Leopold's primordial Eurocentric fantasy. In this essay I eavesdrop on the conversation that the curators want us to have, about extractive colonialism, misappropriation of artefacts and the likelihood of restitution. Is it cynical to suggest that a museum can never be fully decolonised until those artefacts are returned to their places of origin, leaving rows of empty vitrines with title cards identifying their former contents – and until the comfortable notion of finders keepers is no longer tenable?

The furious argument about museums would not have been possible without earlier, more deadly arguments about colonial rule itself. The pieces that follow look at some of the filmmakers, writers, photographers and artists who wrestled with the problem of colonialism on their own terms.

The first is Albert Camus, a journalist in his twenties who understood the different strands of the anti-colonial groupings in his native Algeria and

came out firmly against the armed struggle of the Front de libération nationale. Camus was a principled humanist and a white boy born to impoverished settlers (*pieds noirs*). He favoured federation between coloniser and colonised as a propitious outcome in what turned into a long and ruthless anti-colonial war. His improbable hopes were dashed by Algerian independence in 1962. But *The Stranger*, his most famous novel, had already foreshadowed this disappointment when it appeared twenty years earlier. The protagonist's murder of a nameless colonised person on a beach was a textbook staging of the absurd, and by the time the Algerian struggle was underway, *The Stranger* had found its place in the modernist canon. But there was nothing absurd about the independence war in the minds of the people who waged it. *The Stranger* has always troubled North African readers, but the most imaginative riposte came from Algeria seventy years later with *The Meursault Investigation* (2013), a postcolonial counter-fiction by Kamel Daoud, whose narrator – the brother of Meursault's victim – kills a European by way of retribution. Both killers are locked in complicity.

Daoud's double act with Camus sets the scene for two essays that follow. The first looks at the work of two young Mozambicans, the painter Bertina Lopes and the writer Luís Bernardo Honwana, as the war against Portuguese rule in Mozambique got underway in the early 1960s. Honwana and Lopes were closely associated with Mozambique's independence movements, although Lopes left for Europe and Honwana ended up in a colonial jail. In her paintings and his collection of short satirical fictions, *We Killed Mangy-Dog and Other Stories*, the anti-colonial imagination is in full flight. Lopes's canvases are now widely acclaimed but Honwana's fiction, published in 1964 with her illustrations, has sunk into obscurity.

The second essay follows the French feminist Sarah Maldoror as she turned from theatre to cinema in the 1960s, finding work in Algeria with Gillo Pontecorvo on his epic *The Battle of Algiers* and moving on through a long career. Maldoror's most celebrated film, *Sambizanga* (1972), tracks the wife of a detained activist in Portuguese Angola trying to ascertain the whereabouts of her husband on the eve of an anti-colonial uprising. Maldoror's fascination with the history of liberation struggles continued long after the end of colonial rule in Africa. Like Honwana and Lopes, she held out against the boilerplate agitprop that was expected of her. 'I have no

time to make didactic films,’ she complained to an interviewer after the release of *Sambizanga*.

Decolonisation in Africa was not a fluent process. The first phase began in the 1950s and went on into the 1960s as most of the continent won independence in a blaze of pan-African resolve, leaving roughly 50 million disempowered people in Portugal’s colonies and the redoubts of white minority rule: apartheid South Africa, Namibia and Rhodesia. Decolonisation 2.0 was announced by the collapse of the Portuguese dictatorship in Lisbon, followed rapidly by independence in 1975 for Guinea-Bissau (plus Cape Verde and São Tomé e Príncipe), Mozambique and Angola. The new regimes in Mozambique and Angola took the fight to their white supremacist neighbours, Rhodesia and South Africa, with drastic consequences for citizens in their own countries. The era of colonial rule in southern Africa came to an end in 1990 with the withdrawal of South African forces from Angola and Namibia and Nelson Mandela’s release from prison. Camus had demurred in the first energetic push for decolonisation. Maldoror, Honwana and Lopes, uncertain of the difficulties ahead, were pledged to the success of the second.

‘Players and Parts’ is an excursion into the world of West African studio photography in the late 1950s and early 1960s, when the first wave of independence was staged with a burst of creative intelligence. The photographers’ studios were buzzing with postcolonial promise. Seydou Keïta (Mali) and Sanlé Sory (Burkina Faso), the master portrait artists I celebrate, made a range of backdrops and props available to their clients in these theatres of aspiration. Some opted for the trappings of urbanity and affluence – saloon cars, mopeds, fashion wear, elegant radios in teak casings; some posed for the camera in traditional African dress, hinting at a renaissance of precolonial tradition; others did both. Independence announced the best of all worlds. Patrons paid to look their best, and preferably more elegant than French expatriates in the *nouvelles villes* or their chic teenage children educated in France – that was part of the point. Many of the glamorous items at hand in the photographers’ compounds were beyond the means of Keïta’s sitters; Sory’s post-independence clients were dipping into a paradise on loan. France, meanwhile, would keep an obstructive foot in the door to outright independence. These displays of easy-going grace and ironic defiance have already outlived French neo-colonial policy in Africa.

The same confidence can be found in the South African subjects photographed by Ernest Cole and David Goldblatt, but it is rare. Both photographers were documenting embittered, downtrodden communities in apartheid South Africa – even Goldblatt’s poor whites can seem marooned in their privileges. *House of Bondage*, Cole’s portfolio of damning evidence against apartheid, was published in the US in 1967 and became a bestseller; it was banned in South Africa. ‘When I say that people can be fired or arrested or abused or whipped or banished for trifles,’ Cole wrote in *House of Bondage*, ‘I am not describing the exceptional case for the sake of being inflammatory.’ Goldblatt’s status as a white South African allowed him greater leeway than Black photographers to build a documentary archive of life in a racist society. Goldblatt said that he preferred complexity to moral judgement. But the work he produced over thirty years before the system crumbled is a complex indictment of apartheid.

The anti-colonial imagination didn’t fade into the shadows with the end of colonial rule. It persists in most forms of antiracist activism; it nudges the edgy revisionist conscience of museum keepers; it has a tenacious hold on the arts. The work of the South African artist William Kentridge, a carnival of innovation and enchantment, is none the less entangled in a history of class antagonism, racism and colonial exploitation in the mines on the Rand, where workers and management remain locked in conflict in the post-apartheid era. In John Akomfrah’s video installations, archive footage and imaginative reconstructions pick up the conversation about colonialism as if it had never been adjourned. Haunting figures – some Black, others white – confront us as silent interlocutors, gazing directly to camera. Others look out to sea, their backs towards us, contemplating a history of forced migration and imperial adventure. Kentridge is an admirer of the German modernist Kurt Schwitters; Akomfrah acknowledged the influence of Mark Rothko and Ezra Pound (*The Cantos*) in his lavish installation for the 2024 Venice Biennale. Both artists depend on a repertoire of digital technologies to inflect these high modernist strands that run through their remastered versions of European colonialism.

The Kenyan writer Binyavanga Wainaina is the subject of the penultimate chapter. Wainaina’s narrative voice is often interrupted by different Wainainas – other versions of the teller, who may be bored or simply distracted. To follow these voices across a piece is to understand that

Wainaina, too, is a kind of montage artist, or better still, a sampler, who writes in the manner of a DJ putting together an innovative mix. Wainaina launched his career in the early 2000s with an email to the judges of the Caine Prize – the so-called African Booker – who had turned down his submission because it was published online, not in print. How could they be so oblivious, he objected, to the dearth of analogue publishing in Africa? They changed their minds and he won the prize. He went on to seal his reputation with ‘How to Write About Africa’, a satirical piece published by *Granta* in 2005, which tore into the lazy assumptions of foreign journalists, travel writers and humanitarians roaming the continent and publishing their findings. There are vestiges of the anti-colonial imagination at work in this essay and others, but they are overshadowed by Wainaina’s urgent postcolonial objection to western ‘stupidity’ and the West’s clumsy descriptions of Africa as a world of incompetence, misery and ignorance – or, as he put it in a scathing reference to Joseph Conrad, ‘a heart of fuckedness’.

Wainaina was asking who was licensed to speak about Africa. Why would any outsider, especially a white outsider (scholar, journalist, NGO luminary or educated plunderer) have anything useful to say about lived African experience? This question has become sharper since Wainaina raised it: the high quality of African journalism is now obvious in the digital age, but new-wave racisms in the Anglosphere and Europe have infested the internet, inventing battlegrounds where white supremacism and old colonial descriptions live on to fight another day.

All the essays here are sidelong glances at Africa – a convenient abbreviation for fifty-four countries in which more than a thousand languages are spoken. I insinuate Europeans into this story (Leiris, Camus, Maldoror) on the grounds that the intellectual lineages of Europe and Africa are inextricably mixed. I hope to cut away from the idea of a generic *Africa* by pointing up specific episodes, specific practices – cinema, art, ethnography, photography, writing – that work around it. Many generic versions have come and gone. Others have taken their place. Emerging Africa, beacon of hope and renewal. Worthy, airbrushed Africa, where reporting on poverty, hunger and sickness is an affront to proactive sensibilities and bad news for investors in African start-ups. Timeless Africa, the febrile object of the European imagination, brilliantly

ventriloquised by Achille Mbembe as a continent ‘walled in a time that seems pre-ethical, and in a sense pre-political’. Africa, hatchery of the ‘coming anarchy’, as described by Robert Kaplan in one of the last reactionary overviews written in the days of analogue. The benighted Africa of V. S. Naipaul, where sacred shrines are in disrepair and grubby priests are on the take.¹ Wainaina didn’t see the point in lingering over the colonial legacy, even if his writing tells us that the anti-colonial imagination hasn’t laid these parodies to rest.

Part I

Finders Keepers

1

Report from Sirius B: Colonial Curiosity on the Rampage

In *L'Âge d'homme*, his early excursion into autobiography, Michel Leiris recalls his mother warning him to beware of 'bad people' in the Bois de Boulogne.¹ He imagined the predators in the woods to be 'satyrs', and later, cannibals: he had been struck by an exotic colour illustration in *Le Pêle-Mêle*, a humorous weekly, of 'savages' eating an explorer. Leiris (1901–1990) went on to become an ethnographer, though he is more famous for his lifelong self-investigation in a series of startling autobiographical works. *L'Âge d'homme*, which began to take shape in 1930, was the first. By then, he had finished his military service, abandoned his studies in chemistry and was moving in a world that suited his tastes and interests. He had married Louise Godon, daughter of Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, the connoisseur, gallery owner and dealer who championed many of the great artists of his day, including Pablo Picasso, Juan Gris and Georges Braque. Leiris seemed to know everyone without having scurried from soirée to soirée: the dumbwaiter simply arrived at the floor where the most illustrious guests were dining and delivered him up for their delectation. André Breton made a meal of him, but in 1929 Leiris broke away and joined the team at *Documents*, the short-lived dissident Surrealist periodical edited by Georges Bataille. Leiris was both a marginal and a promising figure. Dangerously self-obsessed, fatally inclined to turn his hand to anything that passed for literature – author of a volume of verse with illustrations by André Masson – he was struggling bravely against the pull of drink and sexual torment.²

Around the time he joined *Documents*, he took up with Bataille's psychoanalyst and embarked on a hybrid psychotherapy of his own. He had barely begun the long march through the unconscious when he decided to pack his bags and strike away from Europe. Towards the end of *L'Âge d'homme*, he describes the moment in an offhand way: 'On the advice of my doctor and thinking I could do with a touch of the strenuous life, I

seized the chance to take a long trip and left for nearly two years in Africa as a member of an ethnographic expedition.’ The passage is deadpan to the point of superciliousness: we could be reading the memoir of an astronaut who alludes to a moon landing in which he took part, but fails to mention the space programme.

The expedition in question was a weightless walk across Africa, already conquered, claimed and administered by its European masters but underexplored for the wealth of its precolonial civilisations. The mission, put together by the ethnographer Marcel Griaule, would cross the continent from west to east, setting out from Dakar, Senegal, in May 1931 and heading home from Djibouti in February 1933. It was one of the great twentieth-century outings, a royal progress by a scientific vanguard of white men, approved by a vote in the French parliament and funded by subscription: Raymond Roussel, the wealthy author of *Impressions d’Afrique* (1909), was one of the donors. The ‘Mission Dakar–Djibouti’ was arduous. It took longer than Cook’s first journey from England to Australia two centuries earlier. Leiris was twenty-nine when he was hired as ‘secretary-archivist’. The story goes that Luis Buñuel turned down a place on the mission, leaving an opening for the new candidate.

Leiris already had an ethnographer’s frame of mind when he signed up for the mission in 1930. With the help of psychoanalysis – isn’t the ‘doctor’ who advises him to go to Africa his analyst? – he had made promising contact with his own tribe of symptoms and begun to understand how they worked: bingeing, anomie, wild dreams, fantastic notions of the feminine other; impotence and a yearning for debauchery. An observer-participant on the Dakar–Djibouti run, Leiris turned out a fascinating journal of its highs and lows as it headed slowly east. *L’Afrique fantôme*, which he published in 1934, is a double ethnography: both an assiduous record of the mission’s findings and a set of field notes for an ethnography of the ethnographers. It is also about the author and his mad preoccupations.

Leiris could easily see himself in regressive series: a person looking at a version of that person looking at another version still. In *L’Afrique fantôme* we can imagine him sitting in a tent, his typewriter on a makeshift surface, writing up the day’s business; sure enough, as we read on, we encounter the image of a writer in a tent, with a typewriter and folding desk. *L’Âge d’homme* supplies a famous example of this *mise en abyme* – Leiris borrowed the term from André Gide – in the form of a cocoa tin. Cocoa,

Leiris explains in *L'Âge d'homme*, was the 'raw material' of his childhood breakfasts. The tin showed a figure holding the very tin on which she's depicted in the same attitude holding the tin, and so on back, in a dizzying plunge into 'infinity', as Leiris thought of it. More than once in *L'Afrique fantôme*, he hints that the Dakar–Djibouti mission is foundering in self-replication, obeying orders that it issues to itself, and evolving into its own miniature as the vastness of the Sahel looms at the outskirts of the encampment.

Good anthropology, as it's said of charity, begins at home. As the expedition's scribe, Leiris was ready to encounter societies far more nuanced, far healthier – and by a margin less exotic – than the object of his ongoing inquiry: Michel Leiris. He may not have enjoyed logging potsherds, or pilfering fetishes and low-tech agricultural tools for the mission as it worked its acquisitive way east, sending artefacts back to the Musée d'ethnographie du Trocadéro. But he was a diligent clerk and, as he understood soon enough, an apprentice ethnographer. His journal is now available in an elegant translation with notes and an introduction by Brent Hayes Edwards, professor of English and comparative literature at Columbia.³

It is a magnificent achievement. Edwards has kept the apparatus of the key French editions, including the footnotes Leiris drew up – many, as Edwards says, added by way of 'curt self-deprecation' – for a second edition in 1951. The first edition, readied during the German occupation, had fallen foul of the Vichy censor ten years earlier. Edwards translates Leiris's preamble to a 1981 edition and includes fascinating passages from letters Leiris wrote to 'Zette' (Louise Godon) during the journey, which appear in a Pléiade edition.⁴ Edwards is an excellent guide to the issues that *L'Afrique fantôme* raises.

Is it fair to call Leiris's sensibility 'primitivist'? Not really, Edwards thinks. Can the journal be described, as the historian James Clifford argued in a famous essay in 1981, as 'ethnographic surrealism'?⁵ Hardly. Was Leiris really in pursuit of the exotic 'black Edens' he had glimpsed with the arrival of jazz in Paris after the First World War? Pretty much: they led him to Africa in the first place, he explains in *L'Âge d'homme*, 'and beyond Africa, to ethnography'. His journal reads as a midwife's notes on the birth of French ethnography, a twinkle in the eye of French sociology when

Leiris was in his late teens. Marcel Mauss, who can justly claim paternity, co-founded the Institute of Ethnology in Paris in the mid-1920s; Leiris attended Mauss's lectures before he left for Africa. Mauss and his colleagues at the Institute trained students in 'descriptive ethnography', stressing the core skills: the 'inquiry' (how to find reliable informants, what to ask them); the inventory (collecting and cataloguing oral testimony and artefacts); a working knowledge of source languages; and crucially the field notes, followed by the monograph (strictly, what ethnography amounts to). Marcel Griaule, trained as an engineer, and then an air force pilot, was one of Mauss's students. With the rudiments of Amharic and an older, liturgical Ethiopian language, Ge'ez, he took off for Ethiopia in 1928, shortly after E. E. Evans-Pritchard set out for Sudan. By settling on Griaule, Mauss had played his strongest card. Griaule, it turned out, was good: he was obviously the figure to head the mission that would assure ethnography a place in the human sciences.

One of the Dakar–Djibouti expedition's outstanding successes was in Gondar, Ethiopia, where Griaule had already led the way. Leiris followed up, in the closing stages of the expedition, by steeping himself in local possession cults, working with charismatic healers – exorcists and propitiators of the spirits that inhabited their patients. He fell in love with one of the healers, he writes in *L'Âge d'homme*: she had syphilis, apparently, and had undergone female genital mutilation. Was this a homage to participant-ethnography or pure delirium on Leiris's part? In any case, he'd found a perfect love object, dangerous and indifferent, to languish over at a distance. His Virgil in Gondar was the Ethiopian scholar Abba Jérôme Gabra Moussié, who led him through his descent. The spirits in question were known as *zar*; they could take possession of their victims on a whim. Leiris, who liked to come face to face with his own demons, was at home with the *zar*. Abba Jérôme and Leiris worked painstakingly through several media – from utterances at the consultations to written versions in Amharic and thence to French – as they rendered the ceremonial songs for the archive in Paris.

At the time of the expedition, Griaule was contemplating a long spell of fieldwork in Ethiopia as the next assignment. Mussolini's invasion, two years after the mission's triumphant return, would throw him off course. He fell back on the founding Dakar–Djibouti discovery: the Dogon of Mali, a relatively isolated people with dazzling origin myths and a fastidious, poetic

sense of interaction with the ancestors – real and mythic – which came to a pitch of expression at funerals and mask festivals. Deaths among the Dogon, a poor, unmedicated farming community, were common; Leiris and Griaule had many opportunities to see the ministrations that had failed the living lavished on the dead, in displays of drumming, dancing, drinking and recitation; above all, in the performance of spectacular masked ceremonies. Leiris – and Griaule, who went on to publish a study of the masks – set about trying to identify their personae, like characters in an alien *commedia dell'arte*, and ascertain the secrets of the Dogon universe.⁶

The journal is a good insider's account of the mission's objectives, routines and setbacks. It records the attitudes of its members to the European officials on whom they relied for logistical support – the mission was a profoundly colonial venture – and to the 'Africans' they encountered, on whom they depended even more: interpreters, fixers, chiefs, performers, keepers of sacred space – all of whom might come together in the planning and execution of a large funeral for a senior clan member. Mistranslations across languages and cultures are as common as engine trouble with the car, botched appointments, rivers unexpectedly in spate or bouts of fever. On the whole, Leiris is well disposed to his African counterparts. There is good and bad behaviour on both sides, but when the mission misbehaves – thieving is one of Griaule's weaknesses – Leiris is sympathetic to the host cultures, who would sooner keep sacred objects in their villages than see them shipped to Paris by a party of Caucasian intellectuals in shorts. In Mali, the mission makes off with a ceremonial artefact from the premises of an initiation cult: a suckling pig, about the size of a pillow, fashioned from coagulated blood and beeswax, 'which Griaule found by slipping surreptitiously into the special hut'. It's now among the African treasures in the museum at Quai Branly in Paris. In Porto-Novo, capital of modern-day Benin, Leiris records that a colonial official has put together a hoard of objects for the mission, 'which we carry off immediately with the cynicism of businessmen or bailiffs' – the team, he reckons, is turning into 'a removals company'. Elsewhere he speaks of the mission's 'piracy', and later of 'looting'.

The journal brings us up against the person Leiris had hoped to leave behind in Europe. He was the first to admit that his adventure hadn't done the trick. He had his own way of going deep into the interior and his entries tell us as much about himself as they do about colonial Africa. He is the

explorer whose image he had seen as a child in *Le Pêle-Mêle*, devoured by his own inner savages, and he is never less than lucid when they pull him apart. His journal labours around the virtuous circles of ethnography and psychoanalysis, returning often, as both propose, to the place from which he set out. ‘To hell with psychoanalysis,’ he writes at one point, utterly exasperated. His dreams are outlandish; his wet dreams are inexplicable to him (‘the abrupt reappearance of sex, when I believed I wasn’t thinking about it in the least’). Helplessness can engulf him at any moment. ‘I’m nervous and depressed,’ he writes within a week of arriving in Dakar. ‘The goals of the trip are growing dim, too.’ With 610 days still to go, it doesn’t bode well. In Ethiopia in August 1932, about 420 days in, he is undone by ‘gloomy thoughts ... To go home; to be old ... How many occupations I will have to struggle to find, to keep myself from going mad! How can I ever live in France again?’ This inwardness is the deep space of Leiris’s male abjection, which he did to a tee. He was anxious throughout the mission both about himself and the destiny of Europe, where the disaster of an earlier war looked increasingly like the prelude to another. In Mali, he thumbs through press agency bulletins at a local post office and notes: ‘The stock markets are closed in several capitals, England is well on the way to ruin ... It is more and more obvious that the West is collapsing – it is the end of the Christian era.’

Bleak premonitions of this kind may not have reached epidemic proportions in France, but they were shared by many of Leiris’s contemporaries. Paul Nizan wrote in the same vein in *Aden Arabie*, an explosive polemic in which he ascribes his departure for the Middle East at the age of twenty to a disgust for the ‘molehill’ of Europe, ‘with its piles of clinker, and slag heaps from worked-out mines’.⁷ Nizan’s professors, he wrote, had sounded off about Europe’s decline, and philosophers had already signalled ‘the decadence of the West’. *Aden Arabie* appeared in 1931, the year Leiris set out for Dakar. In Nizan’s Bolshevik odyssey – framed in Homeric terms – he comes home to find Ithaca as corrupt as it was when he left: France and Europe must be finished off in a blaze of revolutionary purification – ‘We should no longer blush about being fanatical.’ Nizan found it easier than Leiris to externalise the European disaster. Leiris, for his pains, was trying – and failing – to ingest it whole. In *L’Afrique fantôme* we can’t tell where or how his body will erupt next: in

profuse sweats, wet dreams or sores on his feet. Only a stubborn orientalist would blame these afflictions on the tropics.

When Leiris looks around him, there is no better journalist: frank to the point of insolence, often very funny, with an eye for detail and, though he never stops writing, a knack for concision. In Ethiopia he records the moment when Abba Jérôme joins the team in Gondar and pays his respects at the Italian consulate. In the same brief set-piece he catches the imminence of fascist rule in Ethiopia and the challenges that beset a local philologist: 'With his brown skin, bald pate, and professorial beard, [Jérôme] gives the fascist salute, bumps his head against the light, and sits down. The great scholar ... has had a fair number of setbacks during his journey. He tells Griaule and me how he had to traverse a forest on all fours, as the shifta [bandits] had cut down the trees.'

There are good, comic vignettes in Mali: 'In his fevered state, Griaule dreamed that he had to bring lions back for a museum.' In Central African Republic, too: as Leiris is left on his own with an importunate crowd asking him to treat a case of sleeping sickness, 'Griaule chases butterflies along the road.' Earlier, in Cameroon: 'Griaule has acquired two female striped hyenas for the museum'; they are kept in the guest house and have 'a strong, musky smell'. Two days later: 'The hyenas are smelling worse and worse ... Griaule dreamed that his bed was full of snakes (by association with the smell of the snake house at the Jardin des Plantes in Paris).' The thought of France is never far away: both a place of venomous danger, festering between two wars, and the great repository to which all subaltern cultures must pay tribute by yielding up their cherished objects and divulging their religions.

With his taste for profanity and desecration, Leiris was quick to recognise sacred space wherever he set foot. Fumbling for clues to the spirituality of the Dogon and moving around between promising locations, he notes in one that 'the sacred spreads out in every direction, like puddles after rain', and in the next that 'it is relegated to the highest point of the village ... the granaries, the various hiding places'. By contrast, disposable junk from 'the profane world' is thrown onto a garbage dump. Six months later, entering Cameroon after a dull journey through the Christianised regions of the British imperium, he writes: 'The sacred – of which we had been deprived for so long – reappears ... Little archways of leaves and branches simulating doorways, a large, trimmed branch (planted in the ground and

hung with animals' jawbones).' These – I'm guessing – were spirit dwellings, tended by spirit mediums, not unlike the *zar* negotiators he was about to encounter in Ethiopia. 'No more wooden crucifixes,' he records with a sigh of relief.

Leiris was not alone in thinking local African religions more authentic, and worthier of study, than the percolations of Islam and Christianity. The Dogon proved him right, although it was only after the Second World War that he published his own findings, and Griaule unfolded the Dogon universe before a large, non-academic public in *Dieu d'eau*, a bestseller in several languages, based on intensive conversations with the Dogon elder Ogotemmêli.⁸ This was a great moment for French ethnography – all ethnography actually – and *L'Afrique fantôme* is its subversive preface.

Leiris had returned to France in the 1930s with field notes from Sanga, a French colonial district in Dogon country, on the hermetic language of the Dogon mask societies (or 'men's societies', as they were known). This language, spoken by elders and initiates, was known as *sigi so*, or Sigui. It differed from Dogon vernaculars, of which there were several, and required a careful apprenticeship: learning and listening were helped along with a concoction of millet beer, sesame oil and black chilli, poured in an apprentice's ear before a session. Leiris's study of this arcane language contained an essay on Sigui grammar, a Sigui vocabulary, and many ritual texts proper to mask ceremonies and funerals, transcribed from recitations with the help of two interpreters: one to render the texts from Sigui to everyday Dogon, the other to get the result from there into French.⁹ The force and economy of the funeral orations and exhortations to masked dancers are remarkable in French, and hold up through a third transposition into English – for instance, this exhortation to dancers wearing gazelle masks:

Bush goat, greetings!
You've fed on beans, your belly is full
A good man takes a shot at you
Blood flows on the earth
Everyone looks on
The hare looks on
The dove looks on

It screeches

...

Stir your legs

Stir your head

Red, red, red! Everyone looks on

Griaule had made several trips to Dogon country in the late 1930s and returned after the war with his colleague Germaine Dieterlen. Bombarded with questions, his Dogon sources tended to reply with what they called 'la parole de face', or off-the-peg answers. It was in 1946, as Leiris was preparing to publish his book on the secret language, that Griaule was first introduced to Ogotemmêli, a hunter – now blind – who seemed to hold the key to the Dogon universe.

Clearly the guardians of the sacred had resolved to up their game, and over thirty-three days of conversation, Ogotemmêli took Griaule through a crash course in his people's cosmology. It gets off to an illustrious start when Ogotemmêli remarks in passing that the stars, which were formed from pellets of earth flung into space by the creator, were 'taken down' from the sky by women who gave them to their children. 'The children put spindles through them and made them spin like fiery tops to show themselves how the world turned. But that was only a game.' Then, in more serious tones, Ogotemmêli went back to the origin of things, explaining that the Dogon universe began with a false start, when the creator copulated with a form he had made from mud, which in due course gave birth to a jackal. Later the jackal committed an incestuous act with its mother form and acquired speech – 'the first word'.

The creator started over, making two new beings, twins: a fishlike pair of water gods, each with two souls, male and female. From this couple, eight fishlike beings were born: the primal Dogon ancestors. The emergence of language is one of the most striking aspects of the origin myth. As the lone jackal prepares to wander the world and whisper the future to diviners, language undergoes an evolution, when one of the eight ancestors spits threads through his teeth to create a warp, and uses his tongue to move a weft to and fro across it: the fabric issues from his mouth as 'the breath of the second revealed word'. And so it goes on, until a shift from supernatural to natural is brought about by a Promethean blacksmith and the structure of the universe, modelled on a granary, is revealed, finding its symbolic echo

in the granaries built into almost every Dogon household when Griaule was doing fieldwork. He finished writing up his notes in 1947. *Dieu d'eau* and Leiris's monograph appeared in the same year.

Griaule died in Paris in 1956. Not long after, the Dogon laid on a second funeral for him. He was represented in effigy, or rather twin effigies: one was placed on the roof of a house, the other borne along to a burial site in a large procession. The documentary filmmaker Jean Rouch filmed the Dogon mourners honouring their de facto elder and initiate.¹⁰ *Le Renard pâle*, by Griaule and Dieterlen, appeared nine years after Griaule's death.¹¹ It was a broader exploration of Dogon cosmology than *Dieu d'eau* and differed from it in important ways. It brought the Dogon resounding fame by suggesting that they had identified Sirius B, the invisible dwarf star and companion of the Dog Star – now known as Sirius A, one of the brightest stars in the night sky. *Le Renard pâle* raised eager speculations about aliens from space docking in central Mali. Not long after Ogotemmêli's death in 1962, the Dogon morphed into New Age visionaries, whose androgynous ancestors were at home in water, earth and air.

Like Leiris, Griaule and Dieterlen presented a community in terms of its intellectual achievements without much attention to the empirical details of life in Dogon country. Dogon civilisation bore a striking resemblance to the civilisation that wrote it up: 'unmistakably French', Mary Douglas said in 1967, 'so urbane, so articulate, with such philosophical insight'.¹² Mutterings came to a head in 1991, when the Belgian anthropologist Walter van Beek decided to take Griaule and Dieterlen to task: they had forced their material, and Griaule had leaned on his informants, including Ogotemmêli. Whatever he thought of the fieldwork, van Beek regarded the Dogon as a regional one-off. Griaule and Dieterlen had in van Beek's view been labouring under an illusion, and French ethnography had been stranded on Sirius B all along.¹³

But Griaule and the Dogon have kept their status in the French humanities. The Dogon are no less intelligible in France than their best-known competitors, the Cathars of Montailou, introduced to the public by Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie in 1975. Not even the brilliant reductionism of structural anthropology, which stressed the grammar of kinship and exchange over the exotic utterances of unfamiliar cultures, could quite do for the Dogon. In 1989 the Bandiagara escarpment, with its impressive

Dogon villages built into the cliffs, became a UNESCO world heritage site. Islam has since gained ground, though it was present in Griaule's day: he simply ignored what he took to be the dreary beliefs of Dogon Muslims, and Christians obviously, although he was a practising Catholic. The Dogon have learned to weigh their tourism revenues against the neglect of their habitat: their mud-and-straw houses and decorated clay granaries require constant attention, but skilled repairers have been drawn away from this work to become full-time tour guides. Recently the appearance of modern, internationalised jihad in the Western Sahel has seen fewer tourists venturing into Mali.

Neither of these incursions would have seemed likely to Leiris. But he came to believe – contrary to Griaule – that societies at the margins of industrialised, capitalist economies were not motionless objects of study. They didn't sit impassively for lengthy observation by ethnographers like restless sitters in front of fastidious painters. They were adaptive, permeable, alert to constant changes that their investigators couldn't afford to ignore – including colonial penetration. Like the Surrealists, with whom he'd flirted in the 1920s, Leiris was an early anti-colonialist by disposition, and his instincts were confirmed in the field.

Views like his gained ground in France in the postwar period. In 1949, nearly thirty years after the Dakar–Djibouti mission, René Vautier, a young filmmaker, won a commission from a French federation of teachers to record the marvels of the colonial education system in Africa for screenings in schools in the metropole. Troubled by what he discovered, Vautier turned out an excoriating anti-colonial documentary, *Afrique 50*, that cost him a year in prison.¹⁴ As the Algerian war of independence intensified at the end of the 1950s, so did the call in France for outright decolonisation. It left the French Communist Party looking like colonialism's useful idiot and Albert Camus – the subject of a later essay here – feeling increasingly isolated. Yet Leiris was never in doubt. In 1960 he signed the 'Manifesto of the 121'.¹⁵ He and his fellow signatories described France's undeclared war in Algeria as 'a national war of independence' waged by Algerians. They argued that French militants facing treason charges for working with the independence movement had a moral duty to support 'the cause of the Algerian people' and 'the collapse of the colonial system'. As he headed home from Djibouti in 1933, steeped in the works of Joseph Conrad, Leiris had already imagined the end of French colonial rule in Africa.

2

A Visitor's Guide to Three Museums

How can the governments of independent African states explain to the generation that is now growing up that they can't see their cultural heritage in their own countries?

Nii Kwate Owoo, *You Hide Me* (1970)¹

The British Museum, RIP 2000

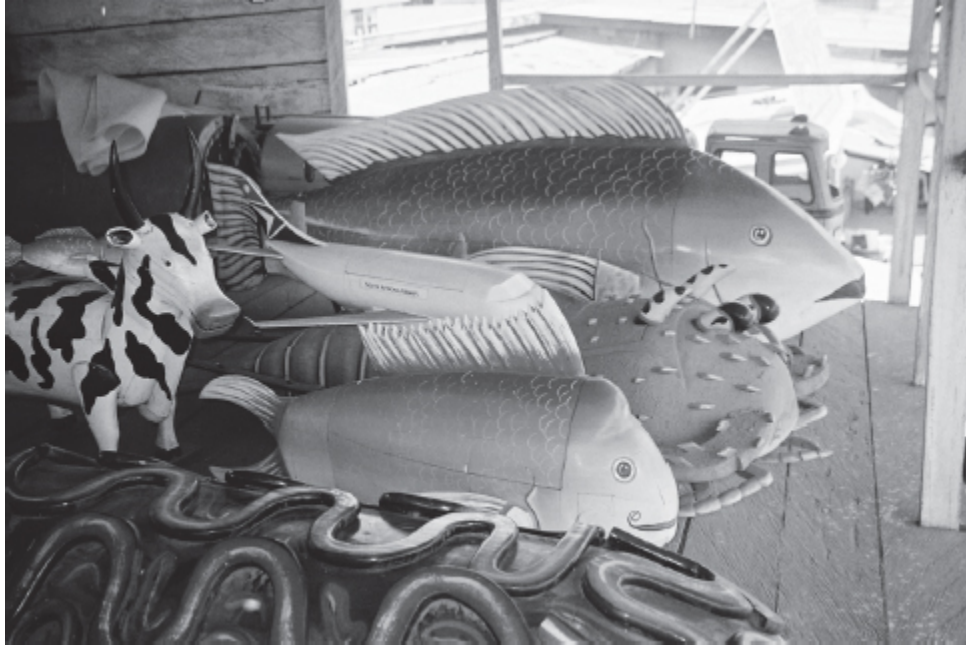
Objects from Africa displayed in galleries leave visitors uneasy. We hesitate to use the word *art* – this is not Giorgione or the Barbizon School or Howard Hodgkin – and hedge our bets with polite words such as ‘artefact’ or ‘decoration’. African narrative and music have fared better. World-music impresarios can market the virtuoso kora players of the Western Sahel; we have the vague academic term ‘orature’ to soothe our anxieties about the fact that the greatest storytelling and poetry from this vast continent had little to do with pen and paper. But ritual masks, pots and cloth, or beaten metals that crackle with political prowess – how are we to decipher and project these as universal goods?

The first step is to dismantle the notion of *Africa* and think of it instead as various places at various times. This is what the British Museum has done in bringing back its African collections from the Museum of Mankind and setting some of the best work on display in the new Sainsbury Africa Galleries, opened to the public in 2001.² A note of triumph is sounded in the BM's press release about the return of all this material ‘to Bloomsbury’. ‘Illuminating world cultures’ – in BM brand-speak – is a sophisticated affair, and what better place than Bloomsbury to illuminate a 400-year-old pectoral mask in brass from Yoruba country or a pair of wooden fish on a hat made from a cardboard case that once held a dozen plastic bottles of drinkable water?

A little nostalgia is in order, then, for the dusty, understated entrepot of Burlington Gardens, where the BM's ethnographic collections used to reside, entangled – it seemed – in the creeper-like attentions of the few: frayed and hollow-eyed adventurers in baggy trousers; researchers from the School of Oriental and African Studies; bustling parties of schoolchildren from Lewisham. But there's no doubt that the new location, in which hundreds of objects are lavishly displayed for a larger audience, is the better option. The difficulty is that when you take an anthropological collection and ask people to think of it in terms of art – as these rooms do – you replace an intellectual framework that can handle all kinds of material with a grand categorical assertion that cannot.

Just as the Africa Galleries have done away with the suggestion of a single Africa, so too they've underplayed the idea of art in favour of a sanguine *anything goes*: easier for the BM, with its wealth of imperial bric-à-brac, than it was for the Royal Academy when it staged its superb Africa exhibition in 1995.³ On the Sainsbury Galleries in Bloomsbury, the anthropologist John Mack, a senior keeper at the BM, has warned against 'a monolithic reinvention of African culture and history', preferring 'to open up a new gateway into a collection that can be mined in very many ways to show something of African varieties of life and thought'.⁴

Yet the suspicion that everything on display may one way or another be thought of as art is carefully – and brilliantly – allowed to linger in the visitor's mind. Mack and his colleagues had already managed this in the Museum of Mankind with their later acquisitions (only intermittently displayed). These have since been conspicuously placed in or about the entrance of the new galleries in Bloomsbury. There is no getting around them. First, upstairs, a stunning group of decorative coffins from Ghana in painted wood, the best a white Mercedes (number plate: RIP 2000), the lid removable, from headlights to tailgate, to admit the deceased. Next a kind of ideal receptacle – a curving ceramic vessel with a sphincter-like protrusion in the broad, inquiring neck. Then a pair of contemporary masquerade figures in steel, fabric, feather and wood, one with a sturdy fishing-boat on its head and an apron splashed with paint – the red of sacrifice.



Fantasy coffins in a workshop in Greater Accra, 2011.

The distinction of all these exhibits is that their makers are named. The decorative coffins, known as *abeduu adekai*, or ‘proverb chests’, come from workshops in Ghana (Paa Willie’s and Paa Joe’s).⁵ The fine ceramic piece is by the Kenyan potter, Magdalene Odundo; and there are masquerade figures by the Nigerian artist Sokari Douglas Camp. It is a proper, and properly political, strategy to preface the big rooms we’re about to enter with a clutch of works whose attribution to individuals or workshops is certain. It alerts us to the likelihood that styles of popular art and more elaborate forms of homage (to notables and ancestors) were never entirely a matter of transcendent aesthetic consensus. Better, surely, to imagine competition between rival schools and individuals: disagreements, closely guarded secrets, and something resembling celebrity, which would have fallen to sculptors or carvers who set their own distinctive mark on an existing style or founded another. This, after all, is how it is in many parts of the continent now.

Social anthropology is happy to name its informants; ethnographic collection, on the other hand, seldom saw the point in attaching a name to an artefact, even when it was possible. Which is one reason for the longstanding belief that African art was an almost mystical expression of the collective. The Africa Galleries make this seem like a silly idea; and so

one can go deep into the past to discover objects that are more than a thousand years old, without losing the sense of a maker who would once have had a name. Hardly strange, though, that we cannot identify the masters of the Benin metals, bronze and brass, plundered by the British for queen and country in 1897 – or that we don't know who carved the ivory pendant mask of Idia, a Benin royal mother, 400 years ago. She is not, by the nature of things, a virgin queen. But the hint of Tudor impassivity reminds us that the period is roughly the same – and that more than one portrait of the English monarch who underwrote John Hawkins's second slaving-voyage along the coasts of Africa in 1564 is by an unknown artist.

Jungle Fever at Quai Branly

Jacques Chirac's museum on the Quai Branly, which opened in 2006, continues to pull large crowds. By 2023 visitors were averaging around 1.3 million a year.⁶ Chirac, a long-time admirer of what used to be called 'primitive' art, made a great deal of noise at the start of his first presidential term about the need to show the various public collections to better advantage. This, it turned out, would involve closing the Musée national des arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie and hollowing out the Musée de l'homme. He suggested, not entirely in passing, that some of the artefacts pried loose in the process should be housed at the Louvre. The idea, which he'd borrowed from the eccentric collector Jacques Kerchache, left the keepers at the Louvre in turmoil.⁷ It also threw social scientists at the École des hautes études en sciences sociales and curators at the Musée de l'homme into a state of battle-readiness: the museum's wonderful collection of pieces was a storehouse of meanings that could not be properly divulged, they argued, by aesthetics or art history. This epistemological issue was central for staff at the Musée de l'homme when they went on strike after Chirac served notice that the plan would go ahead.

What Chirac really wanted was a monument, a Chirac museum in the manner of François Mitterrand's Bibliothèque nationale, but he could hardly insist while he was busy urging cuts in public spending. The comic stand-off he created was very much to his advantage and rapidly descended into pure parody. The rugged ethnographic faction at the Musée de

l'homme would not let their cherished objects fall into the hands of exquisite fops at the Louvre if they could help it. The anaemic Louvre contingent, for its part, turned a shade paler at the prospect of inheriting 'primitive' acquisitions from the Musée de l'homme. But the president had spoken, and the deal was all but done.

The agreement that followed appeared to favour the rugged party over the dandies: a new museum would go up on a plot of land across the river from the Palais de Chaillot, the home of the Musée de l'homme. Chirac had got what he wanted without having to go begging. The arguments surrounding a new museum dedicated to 'the arts and civilisations of Africa, Asia, Oceania and the Americas' continued to simmer before they came to a head ten years later in a passionate debate about the ownership of precious artefacts, capital accruals from slavery in the Global North and restitution, driven forward by Black Lives Matter. In France in 2006 there was an ambient minority view that the museum patronised the cultures it wished to invest with lustre. Objections from scholars – the rugged faction no less than the fops – turned on whether a Tuareg tent cushion, for instance, was an extremely beautiful household object, an ethnological treasure or a work of art. Not everyone was happy, finally, with the architect Jean Nouvel's conception, especially when it came to the main building that houses the permanent collection: a long nave – more than 200 metres – set on stilts and gently curved, echoing the nearby bend in the Seine.

The real difficulty for the Musée du Quai Branly lay beneath these controversies. France has fumbled for two centuries with identity and difference, and the problem of what to do about them. When the Republic extends the courtesy of 'assimilation' to people from other cultures, it is rebuffed for acting in bad faith; when it grits its teeth and prepares to celebrate 'difference', it is accused of exoticism or thought to be in the grip of a cultural hallucination brought on by the return of tropical fevers acquired in the colonies.

Even without the racism of everyday life in France, there was no way that Quai Branly could have avoided this trap. All the same, there might have been more caution. The permanent collection in the main gallery, which includes 3,500 artefacts, some of them superb, is steeped in significant dimness. The penumbra of Nouvel's nave, to which the plant motif on the vast windows adds by filtering out natural light, is dangerously close to a fantasy of pre-contact worlds adrift in fertile obscurity.

Calamitous kinds of contact, one thinks a little ahistorically as the rooms get dimmer, could occur any minute as a careless visitor blunders into a bronze funeral drum from Hoa Binh province or a showcase of anthropomorphic spoons. Elsewhere the larger artefacts and splendid vitrines are beautifully illuminated, like sacred objects in a series of clearings. Yet the skill and reverence of the lighting only emphasise the racist jungle flavour of the overall conception.

Moulded partitions are part of the problem. A series of elongated walls which propose pathways round the gallery, allowing the visitor to navigate a looping passage from Oceania to the Americas, has prompted a comparison – not mine – with a journey through the great intestine.⁸ The great outdoors may have been what Nouvel and his team had in mind, but the leather, or pseudo-leather, upholstery on the partitions simply elevates a clunky failure of taste into an error of judgement: leather means cattle, cattle means pasture and pasture implies deforestation. Many of the pieces on show in the main gallery were produced by forest peoples.

A common criticism of the permanent collections at Quai Branly is that they are displayed without any breaks to distinguish the four geographical areas. The result seems to assert a universality of cultures. A deified ancestral figure carved from basalt in the Marquesas has a plausible resemblance to an Aztec dog made 600 years earlier from different stone. A maze-like mother-of-pearl decoration on a shield from the Solomon Islands anticipates the pigment design on a Congolese loincloth about a century later. In this sense, Quai Branly is a pageant of affinities, which is precisely what the staff at the Musée de l'homme dreaded. At the same time, great efforts have been made to explain and contextualise the artefacts on display without overbearing quantities of text. It is unfair to see the huge gallery, the centrepiece of Chirac's museum, as the vulgar burial ground of ethnography.

The Musée d'ethnographie du Trocadéro was inaugurated in the 1880s on the site of the immense Palais de Chaillot, which had been built for a universal exhibition a few years earlier. In 1937 it was once again the main site of a new universal exhibition, intended to mark a high point in the run of colonial and international shows that had begun in the 1840s. The Musée de l'homme came into existence in the same year. If ever the signs and artefacts of the tribe needed accurate reading, 1937 was the moment. In the exhibition grounds, Albert Speer's fascist pavilion kept company with its

florid Soviet counterpart. Picasso's *Guernica* was on display in the nearby Spanish pavilion. French ethnography had not yet renounced its origins as a colonial discourse but it had passed through the gates of social science – obligingly held open by Émile Durkheim and his successors at *L'Année sociologique* – to occupy a new symbolic home in the Palais de Chaillot.⁹ Conceived in imperial splendour and inspired by the cultures of conquered races, this fashionable discipline would eventually emerge as the sorcerer's apprentice of political economy for many left-leaning, anti-colonial intellectuals in Europe in the interwar period and beyond.

The 1937 exhibition meant to assert that mankind was the sum of its creations. If the calculation was correct – and it was looking decidedly wobbly – there would be everlasting peace between peoples. But Europeans, who were about to engage in another barbaric war, were no longer reliable prophets of this utopian project. In 1940 Hitler, something of an expert on 'peoples', was photographed on the esplanade of the Palais de Chaillot with the Eiffel Tower in the background. By the following year, the Musée de l'homme, which had its own Resistance cell, was under assault. Two senior staffers were executed by the Germans.¹⁰ Paul Rivet, the founder of the museum, who'd helped set up the Institut d'ethnologie with Marcel Mauss and Lucien Lévy-Bruhl in the 1920s, was also active in the Resistance. In 1942, he left for Colombia. Germaine Tillion, an ethnologist working on Amizagh cultures in colonial Algeria, was deported to Ravensbrück and escaped in the spring of 1945.

Did anthropology become linked, in some mythical way – and more than other disciplines – with anti-fascism? In the postwar period, largely thanks to the pre-eminence of Claude Lévi-Strauss, it continued to enjoy a heroic status, often enhanced by the remote cultures which it investigated, as well as the epiphanies of fieldwork that gave it secret access to the inhibitions and prohibitions of its own societies. Marcel Griaule, who had been working with the Dogon since the 1930s, became a celebrity after the war, when he and Germaine Dieterlen published *Le Renard pâle*. With their new age cosmology *avant la lettre*, the Dogon became celebrities too. But structural anthropology was there to rein in wayward enthusiasms and insist that the study of mankind was strictly a science. It was a successful double act.



Sacred animal likeness stolen by Michel Leiris at Griaule's insistence from an initiation lodge in Mali in 1931.

Quai Branly's pretensions to seriousness are justified by the academic links it has put in place, its public lectures and the trouble it has taken, upstairs in the multimedia gallery, to explain the basics of anthropology. But I miss the enchanted fustiness of the museums whose collections it hoovered up – and the echoes of ethnography's anti-fascist impulse, which was closely associated with anti-colonialism. As for exoticism, it's hard to say how the Quai Branly Museum scores until some of the grotto effects – the upholstery and the Tarzan decor on the windows – are worn down by time. The collections are now better signed and punctuated, so that visitors don't saunter away from an Ethiopian Christian painting (out of Africa) to find themselves in front of a Brazilian fish mask (into the Americas) used for warding off sickness during the dry season. The art of display, however, reaches its high point not in Nouvel's building but at the Pavillon des Sessions at the Louvre, a Quai Branly satellite – and a consequence of Chirac's initial gambit – which houses a best-of selection in magnificent surroundings.

Chirac's baby has been a greedy tyke, amassing 300,000 items from its source collections, vastly more than a visitor is ever likely to see. Most are secluded in a floodproof basement. The exception is the reserve of musical

instruments housed in a large transparent tower rising from the basement through the foyer of the building. Despite this viewer-friendly high-rise of drums, flutes, idiophones and zithers, visitors saw more for their money at the Musée de l'homme, which had five times the number of objects on display.

In 2007 gloomy perplexities in France about 'the other' combined with a no less overworked obsession, 'le regard', to provide the title of an exhibition in the elegant Garden Gallery annexed to the main building at Quai Branly, *D'un regard l'Autre*.¹¹ It was an impressive show that set the right tone for the whole Quai Branly enterprise, if only the props for the permanent collections could be improved. There was a big question to be asked about the way non-European cultures have been represented and another about the representers themselves. *D'un regard l'Autre* asked both and had two star turns. The first was a display of maps drawn by cartographers and engineers on Nicolas Baudin's expedition to Australasia in 1800, leading into Charles Alexandre Lesueur's watercolours from this and later journeys. Confidence, intelligence, a discerning eye and a steady hand: these were some of the virtues of the explorers gazing on unfamiliar landscapes and life forms. Such a profusion of talents is hard to imagine now.

There was also, most memorably, a darkened rondavel-shaped room filled with war trophies: spears at the top, then shields, clubs, cudgels and knives, disposed in a circle, like a large articulated fan. These were the weapons of the subjugated peoples, brought home by Europeans as trophies, but also to quantify the different levels of technological backwardness among the lesser races. Around the outside of the room were anthropometric heads, supposed to enable similar judgements on the basis of brain size and skull formation. Inside and out, this was a perfectly achieved exhibit, done on a grand scale with minimal fuss: a tribute to the cultures that withered under western eyes and an early gesture of atonement, before the assault on the museums began in earnest.

Decolonisation for Beginners: The AfricaMuseum, Tervuren

An hour into the galleries of the AfricaMuseum in Tervuren, on the outskirts of Brussels, you come to *Tonga*, a startling three-dimensional piece by Nada Tshibwabwa, a Congolese sculptor, painter, musician and performer. Made from recycled mobile phone waste, it's roughly the size of a ceremonial mask designed to fit a human head. Tshibwabwa was an artist in residence at the museum in 2022 and *Tonga* is now part of the permanent collection. 'Tonga' translates from Lingala as 'build': he finds his materials by walking the streets of Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo, or picking through its waste dumps. The east of the country is rich in gold and coltan, with a large informal mining sector, often managed by armed groups who run ore across the borders to Rwanda, Burundi and Uganda. Tshibwabwa's masks and body costumes, assembled as *The Hidden Face of Coltan*, are a parody of early-modern plate armour. Their martial character reminds us that the coltan in our phones is a blood mineral, which fuels the wars in eastern DRC. As visitors reach for their mobiles to post photos of *Tonga*, the mask looks backs sceptically. What is the real connection, it seems to ask, between the lives of Congolese coltan miners and our smart devices, neither of them known for their longevity? It also makes the point that traditional masks and other artefacts in the museum's collection were objects of cultural extractivism during the colonial era (and after): precious assets that have slipped beyond the reach of the DRC, along with its natural resources.

Tervuren's acquisition of works by contemporary Congolese artists is a consequence of the long effort to turn the museum from a temple of racist kitsch into a modern, decolonised institution. Its earliest incarnation dates from a universal exhibition in Brussels in 1897, whose African component was staged in the Palace of the Colonies. The palace became the site of a permanent colonial display the following year. King Leopold II of Belgium had been running the Congo Free State as a personal fiefdom for more than a decade, issuing franchises to European companies at terrible cost to the Congolese. This arrangement continued until 1908, when ownership of the Congo passed from the king to the Belgian state.

By then the old palace was too small for its burgeoning contents. Leopold had already foreseen this and commissioned Charles Girault, architect of the Petit Palais in Paris, to design a larger building, which opened in 1910. Leopold had died the previous year. The museum, which remained a monument to his imperial genius, was also a hub of scientific endeavour

and a repository for anything that the many naturalists, anthropologists, zoologists, marksmen, medics, missionaries and amateur collectors who undertook service in Africa found interesting. There were stuffed animals, Congolese artworks and ceremonial devices, samples of precious commodities (timber, ivory, ore), exotic insects and arachnids, venomous snakes pickled in formaldehyde and human remains. The Royal Museum of the Belgian Congo became the Royal Museum for Central Africa after Brussels choked back its fury and granted independence to Congo in 1960. Whatever it was called, it was a domain where time stood still, immobilised by vulgar statuary depicting Europe's magnanimity and its civilising effects on the Congolese. Here and there were tributary likenesses of the monstrous Leopold.



Tonga, c. 2019, Nada Tshibwabwa.

In 2013 the museum closed its doors and embarked on a major redesign. The architectural changes, including a long underground gallery that would transform visitors' first impressions of the building, must have felt less challenging than the long overdue re-evaluation of the holdings and their presentation. Tervuren was conceived as a showcase for the splendours of Leopold's vast annex in Africa, but by the 1900s an international movement

for ‘Congo reform’ was spreading word of European atrocities, especially for families of rubber tappers who fell short of their quotas. Leopold’s project had become a scandal, even for staunch imperialists such as Joseph Conrad. The transfer of wealth away from the Free State was impressive, as were the rewards for international business and the crown. An estimate by the museum itself suggests that 4,700 tonnes of ivory were shipped to Antwerp between 1889 and 1908. In *The King Incorporated*, Neal Ascherson records that between 1896 and 1906 Leopold cleared a personal profit in his *Domaine de la couronne* of nearly £3 million – perhaps £500 million in today’s currency – from his own businesses and franchise fees to others.¹² It was largely on these takings that the museum was founded, furnished and redeveloped. This history would have to be addressed.

There was another question that bore on the museum’s decolonisation project. Within moments of Congo’s independence, Washington and Brussels began destabilising the new leadership in the capital, with the acquiescence of the UN’s secretary-general Dag Hammarskjöld, and fanning a secession in the mineral-rich province of Katanga. The prime minister, Patrice Lumumba, was deposed after only three months in power. Four months later he was assassinated by a scratch firing squad overseen by former Belgian colonial police officers. In 2001, a Belgian parliamentary committee finally acknowledged that the government of the day ‘bore a moral responsibility’ for Lumumba’s murder. A square in Brussels was named after him in 2018, the year the museum reopened. How was it meant to broach this episode, if at all?

Above all, there was the matter of provenance. The new museum was roundly criticised by scholars and the Congolese diaspora in Belgium for the inadequacy of its decolonising ambitions. One charge was that too little had been done to explain how the collections were amassed. The museum responded by placing far more emphasis on provenance in *ReThinking Collections*, a 2024 show which offered a detailed itinerary of several artefacts and set out Belgium’s current policy on restitution: an object is unlikely to be returned if there is evidence that it changed hands without coercion, but if it can be shown that it was taken without consent – looted, stolen or acquired by deception – there are grounds for handing it back. Between the two extremes lies a grey area: consent without payment, for example – alleged consent, or that equivocal token of exchange, the *gift*.

Several of the consultants who played a role in the museum's reinvention believe that provenance isn't the central issue when it comes to restitution. The museum 'will never be able to answer all the questions about the origin of the collections', Sarah Van Beurden, co-curator of ReThinking Collections and a historian of central Africa, told me. 'Other pathways ... should be possible. For example, what if a certain type of object no longer exists locally, would that not be just as good a reason for a restitution?' Anne Wetsi Mpoma, another consultant, argues that provenance may even be an obstacle to restitution. It's easy to imagine an artefact stranded in limbo as scholars rummage in the archive hoping to discover how it made its way to Belgium a hundred years ago. Near the end of his life, dogged by criticism of the Free State, Leopold destroyed many papers held at the International African Association, a propaganda organisation created in Brussels in the 1870s to press his claims in central Africa. But there is still a mass of analogue documents to re-examine at the museum – on at least 3 kilometres of shelving – in the light of current decolonial thinking. Some are slowly being digitised.

The new curation handles the wrecking of Congolese independence frankly but briskly, with a minimum of space, text and visuals. On colonial extraction, which went on after Leopold's day to include modern techniques for mining copper and uranium, it privileges natural history over the history of resource plunder. And despite ReThinking Collections, the permanent exhibition is shy about provenance. Today the museum holds 129,000 cultural objects, the majority from the Belgian Congo. Most of the remaining 5 per cent are from modern-day Rwanda and Burundi, former German colonies, which the League of Nations mandated to Belgium after the First World War. Around 40,000 objects and artefacts were shipped out of Congo before the outbreak of war in 1914; roughly 9,000 of those are of unknown origin. A large haul was made between 1911 and 1913, during an expedition in north-eastern Congo sponsored by the museum and led by an ex-military man, Armand Hutereau, to enhance the collection.

The field was highly competitive at the time. The Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin had recently wrapped up a similar expedition, while another on behalf of the American Museum of Natural History was still in progress. Hutereau gathered an array of ceramics, statues and musical instruments; he took photos and captured moving images of dancers and musicians on nitrate film; he recorded hours of music on phonograph

cylinders. The tally for the museum was roughly 8,000 pieces, including the recordings. None of this would have happened without the co-operation of a local dignitary, Chief Moroka, who appears to have welcomed Hutereau. But recent interviews with Moroka's descendants have cast doubt on the serenity of their relationship – and on Hutereau's *modus operandi*. Was he merely a capable collector who struck up judicious alliances or was there another side to his character? According to oral tradition, passed down to the present generation in Moroka's old domain, Hutereau was a *sasa-moka* – a man with a homicidal streak.^{[13](#)}

Spectacular one-off plunders of the kind the British pulled off in Benin City in 1897 were rare in Congo, but a beautiful statue representing the ancestors of Lusinga Iwa Ng'ombe, a refractory chief, was taken by the Congo Free State officer Émile Storms after a military showdown near Lake Tanganyika in 1884. On his return to Belgium, Storms brought with him not only the statue but the heads of Lusinga and two other defeated Congolese leaders. Lusinga's skull was acquired by the International African Association during Storms's lifetime (he died in 1918), transferred to the museum at Tervuren in the 1930s and then to the Royal Institute of Natural Sciences in the 1960s, a few years after Lumumba's assassination.

The clash with Lusinga is glossed in the permanent display, which includes a letter from the secretary of the International African Association to Storms asking for specimen skulls. Dispatching the remains of dead Congolese to Europe for scientific examination was a workaday habit that persisted well into the twentieth century. Burial sites were also explored ostensibly for archaeological purposes. In the 1930s and again in the 1950s the archaeologist Maurits Bequaert removed thousands of objects to Brussels, sometimes with proof of Congolese consent. Among them, however, were the grave goods of a distinguished Congolese chief, which Bequaert had pledged – and failed – to return. That breach of promise could in principle open the way for restitution. Many of the objects (chinaware, glass bottles, Toby jugs) are of European origin but still of interest to Congolese communities as sacred funerary goods. Well before independence, the boundaries between European and African tastes were becoming porous, as Europeans brought their finery to trading depots and Congolese exchanged or sold their own wares, sometimes proposing facsimiles of originals they were loath to part with. Historical styles of

carving and sculpture at the time were undergoing changes to accommodate the tastes of amateur colonial buyers.



Statue of Lusinga, date uncertain.

Graveyards were also key sites for aficionados of race theory and physical anthropology. Ferdinand van de Ginste was a colonial tax collector, whose rounds during the 1930s and 1940s often took him to Feshi, a rural area near the border with Portuguese Angola. He was known locally as Waia-Waia, or the man on the move. Once they got wind of his arrival, residents of Feshi would sing a warning song to alert their neighbours. He went about with a *chicotte*, a whip made from hippopotamus hide perfected by the Portuguese, which he used liberally on local tax debtors and deficient rubber tappers. In 1945, as the intellectual tide in Europe was turning against race theory and cranial measurement was going out of fashion, Van de Ginste notified his superiors that he meant to excavate human remains in and around Feshi. When the authorisation came through, he enrolled Congolese workers to dig up cemeteries, offering them 2.5 Belgian francs (maybe €4–5 in today's currency) per skull. The result was a macabre shipment to Tervuren in 1947 of 185 skulls and another forty or so body parts. They were examined by a few anthropologists who remained enthralled by biological evidence of ethnic difference. But the game was up for racialised craniometry by the time the remains from Feshi left Tervuren for the Royal Institute of Natural Sciences, along with Lusinga's skull. By then Van de Ginste had committed suicide.¹⁴

A major obstacle to a fully decolonial ambience in Tervuren is the building itself, the apogee of Leopold's ambition. Until it's razed, or transfigured by daily graffiti, or slathered in paint like several statues of Leopold in Belgium (including one at the museum in 2020), its benighted grandeur situates the conversation in the shadow of the old order. It's nonetheless a good place to hold it. For the renovation Aimé Mpane, born in the DRC in 1968, sculpted a riposte to the 1920s colonial-era statues that stake out the circumference of the grand rotunda – the least repentant part of Girault's building. The curators had planned to remove them until the Flanders Heritage Agency decreed that they should stay put. Mpane's *New Breath or Burgeoning Congo*, a monumental latticed wooden head, heralds a Congolese renaissance after more than two centuries of turmoil.

On its own, though, it was no match for its intransigent surroundings and Mpane was commissioned to make a second, larger head, again in openwork wood, that evokes the skull of Lusinga. The two pieces face each other under the dome of the rotunda. Mpane later collaborated with the Belgian artist Jean Pierre Müller on a series of printed veils, now suspended

in front of the colonial statuary. The fabrics are translucent, allowing us to glimpse the original offence behind the eloquent reproach. One of the imperial allegories, *Belgium Brings Wellbeing to the Congo*, shows a Belgian matriarch with two hapless Congolese children. Mpane and Müller veiled it with an image of a Belgian paratrooper holding an automatic rifle.

When it was first hung, the veil was accompanied by a panel explaining that it depicted a soldier deployed to Stanleyville in 1964 ‘during the crushing of the Simba rebels’: an uprising by Lumumba’s followers three years after his death that spread through nearly half of the country. In 2021 the panel was removed after a veterans’ association of Belgian paratroopers challenged its contents in a lawsuit. ‘One more example,’ Van Beurden told me, ‘of how the colonial – and postcolonial – past is still contested in Belgium.’ If the decolonisation of museums can be achieved, it will have to be done on tiptoe, raising objections with each tentative step.

The most garish sculpture in the old museum showed a Congolese ‘leopard man’ towering over his prostrate Congolese victim. It went on display in 1915 and remained in place for nearly a century. The protagonist wears a spotted hood and tunic; metal claws protrude from his fingers; he is preparing to strike. He is the embodiment of Europe’s anxieties about African ‘superstition’: leopard men were a perfect alibi for Belgian colonialism. Members of a secret society known as *anioto*, they were essentially local militias in the north-east of Congo, enforcing the rules laid down by adjacent chieftancies within their own communities, and punishing infringements by neighbours. They first came to the attention of Europeans in the early 1890s, during Leopold’s day. By the time the exoticist sculptor Paul Wissaert had completed *The Leopard Man of Stanley Falls*, Belgium was creating Potemkin chieftancies from scratch, which threw the existing order into chaos and led to a rise in *anioto* killings. Colonial policy was reproducing the very thing it promised to eradicate.

None of this would have been apparent to visitors confronting Wissaert’s grisly tableau, though Hergé had a vague sense of it. He scoured the museum for ideas as he began work on one of Tintin’s earliest adventures, serialised in 1930 and published the following year in book form as *Tintin au Congo*. The first edition was so toxic for postwar sensibilities that it was rejigged twice to appease its critics, with mixed results. But Hergé’s leopard man, a dim-witted villain, survived the 1970 rewrite – and the attentions of Tintin, who persuaded him to betray his Belgian accomplice. Things could

have turned out worse: after the first *anioto* trial in 1920, the colonial administration hanged several of the accused.¹⁵

Tervuren's look back in anguish predates the museum's five-year redesign. On the eve of the millennium, two books about the imperial past caused a stir in Belgium: Adam Hochschild's *King Leopold's Ghost* and Ludo De Witte's *L'Assassinat de Lumumba*. They were met by and large with queasiness or outright denial. Even so, De Witte's book was the start of a long reappraisal. In 2000, the artist Toma Muteba Luntumbue was invited to curate a controversial show at Tervuren entitled *Exit Congo Museum: A Century of Art With or Without Papers*.¹⁶ It mixed pieces and installations by contemporary artists with rearrangements of precious artefacts in the collections – in one instance as a jumble of objects, seemingly neglected. It's said that a former curator at the museum, Huguette Van Geluwe, left in tears when she saw the managed disarray. But Luntumbue and his collaborators were pitting the artefacts' social significance for communities that had lost them against the interest they held for buccaneer ethnographers and an indifferent Belgian public.

By now renovation looked inevitable, and in 2002 Chéri Samba came up with *Reorganisation*, an oil painting dramatising the debates that were underway. Wissaert's leopard man sculpture is balanced on a mattress halfway down the steps of the museum entrance, being hauled away on ropes by a group of resolute Congolese. At the top of the steps a pair of museum staff with ropes of their own are trying to haul it back. Guido Gryseels, who had recently been appointed director, stands with his arms folded, presiding over the tug-of-war. A panel of text spells out the issues. Museum staffers: 'We can't allow this work to leave the museum; it's made us what we are today.' Gryseels: 'True. And regrettable. But we have to reimagine the museum from the ground up.' Samba doesn't need to tell us what the raiding party has in mind. Wissaert's sculpture has since been consigned to a basement in Tervuren for 'problematic objects', corralled with other sidelined colonial-era statues.



Reorganisation, 2002 (detail), Chéri Samba.

On the main floor, in the realm of the not-quite-forgiven, is *Shadows*, a superb installation by Freddy Tsimba. In 1897, more than 260 men, women and children were shipped to Antwerp from the Free State and delivered to Tervuren. It was the year of the World's Fair and they were expected to recreate the life of the industrious, subjugated race in a human zoo where tens of thousands of European visitors could see them go about their business as if they were still in the Congo. With them came all the accoutrements of village life: rondavels, cooking pots, pirogues, musical instruments. In *King Kasai*, an account of his overnight stay in the AfricaMuseum, the French journalist Christophe Boltanski reminds us that it was a wet, chilly summer. The women were given light cotton tops to cover their breasts while the men wore traditional dress. At night they slept next to the stables; by day they performed for eager crowds – 1.8 million visitors in two months. Some threw them sweets and bananas, until signs had to be put up: ‘Do not give food to the natives, we are seeing to this ourselves.’¹⁷ It wasn't long before the climate, and European microbes, took their toll. Seven Congolese in the king's theme park died of pneumonia, or maybe influenza. We know their names (or pseudonyms)

because they were buried in a nearby churchyard: Sambo, Zao, Ekia, Pemba, Kitoukwa, Mibange and Mpeia. Tsimba has used light and shadow to evoke them – and other dead Congolese – in a colonnade where a plaque honouring some 1,500 Belgians who lost their lives on imperial service for Leopold was unveiled in the 1930s. To browse the list of the king's 'first pioneers' you have to walk slowly down the colonnade with your back to a run of tall windows giving onto a courtyard. On this prodigal expanse of glass Tsimba has printed his own inventory of dead Congolese. On a clear day, as the sun crosses the courtyard, they appear as shadow names, shifting imperceptibly, projected by the light across and alongside the names of the Belgian dead. The result – a kind of mobile palimpsest – feels very much like an act of affective restitution, as the arguments about physical returns drag on.

They are not new. During the 1870s, the Belgian entrepreneur Alexandre Delcommune seized a powerful wooden sculpture (the word 'fetish' is mostly avoided) from Ne Kuko, a chief in Boma region. Ne Kuko contested the theft from the outset and the AfricaMuseum now cites him as its owner. Renewed calls for restitution were made at the time of independence. In the late 1960s roughly 200 artefacts were sent from Tervuren to North America for a touring show, organised by the Walker Arts Centre in Minneapolis; among them was Ne Kuko's emblematic figure. In 1973 Mobutu Sese Seko, president of Congo-Kinshasa, was adamant that he wanted them back. Between 1976 and 1982, once the term 'restitution' had been ruled out, more than a hundred pieces were returned to Kinshasa as 'gifts'. Many are still nominally the property of the museum. Only one of them was on Mobutu's wish list.

The museum in Tervuren was closed for renovation in the same year that Black Lives Matter emerged in the US, after Trayvon Martin's murder in Florida in 2012. A widespread assault on supremacist statuary followed: in San Francisco (Ulysses Grant among others), Bristol (Edward Colston) and Cape Town (Cecil Rhodes). For BLM and many others, it was clear that the West was defending its own ritual statuary while failing to relinquish sacred artefacts lifted from Africa during the colonial era. Some institutions – perhaps to their relief – have their hands tied. The British Museum is barred from disposing of its holdings – and immunised against restitution – by a law enacted in 1963. In 2005, the High Court ruled against making an

exception in the case of four Old Master drawings which had been appropriated by the Gestapo in 1939 from their Jewish owner.

In 2017, on a visit to Burkina Faso, Emmanuel Macron promised to set the ball rolling for loans and restitutions to Africa. He commissioned a report by Bénédicte Savoy, a French art historian, and Felwine Sarr, a Senegalese economist, ‘on the restitution of African heritage’.¹⁸ Their findings paved the way for the return of twenty-six objects held in France to the Republic of Benin. All, including three anthropomorphic figures (part human, part fish or animal) of Dahomean kings, had been seized in the 1890s, after the royal family of Dahomey fled a French expeditionary advance. The journey of these African magi, 130 years later, from the museum at Quai Branly in Paris to their destination in present-day Benin, is recorded in Mati Diop’s documentary *Dahomey* (2024).¹⁹ In 2022 the Smithsonian announced the legal transfer of 29 bronzes to Nigeria. At the end of the year Germany’s foreign minister accompanied 22 pieces to Abuja. Like the Smithsonian trove, they were among the 5,000 bronzes seized by the British from Benin City (in present-day Nigeria) and trafficked to international dealers a few years after the palace of Abomey (in present-day Benin) was abandoned to the French. Unlike France, Germany’s first step on the road to restitutions had been to agree a memorandum of transfer from the federal government, the Länder and the nation’s museums to the Nigerian authorities. Roughly a thousand artefacts from Benin City residing in Germany are now considered as loans from the National Commission for Museums and Monuments of Nigeria. (The Commission is happy for many to remain for the time being.) The danger with such a deal is that Germany may want to rest on its decolonial laurels and leave it at that. But Macron’s gesture should be treated with caution too: restitution in France is a piecemeal affair, requiring parliamentary approval on a case-by-case basis. Who knows when the next returns will be approved?

In 2022, the Belgian government provided the DRC with an inventory of 85,000 Congolese objects in state collections, most of them at Tervuren. But Congolese researchers who would like to explore the archives for themselves – and whose interpretations could be at variance with those of their European counterparts – are held back from entry to the EU by stringent visa regimes. Digitisation, meanwhile, remains a slow project. How can a museum be decolonised if the descendants of colonised

Congolese can't gain access to its archives? Until that happens, you'd have to call it a museum of reappraisal, mostly by Europeans of their colonial past – and face up to the disappointment of many stakeholders in Africa and Belgium.

‘Restitution is virtue signalling of an irresponsible sort,’ the historian David Abulafia wrote in the *Spectator* in 2025, ‘threatening the integrity of great collections by pretending to apologise for past sins.’²⁰ Try sounding off about ‘great collections’ in the West to the Béninois students in Diop’s *Dahomey*, who lament the paucity of the returns – a fraction of France’s holdings – even though they don’t trust the president of Benin with their safe-keeping. Misgivings in Europe about the future of repatriated objects are shared by many African curators. By the mid-1980s a trickle of artefacts that had been returned to Congo at Mobutu’s insistence, including several on loan from Tervuren, began to appear for sale on western art markets; more turned up in the early 1990s after a wave of unrest across the country. Mobutu was an unreliable keeper of the pieces he claimed to revere. He came to prominence in 1961 as the facilitator of Lumumba’s downfall on behalf of Belgium, the CIA and the Katanga secessionists. He was anointed president of the DRC in 1965 after the defeat of the Simba rebellion. He went on, as a dictator and kleptocrat, to rule the country for more than thirty years (renaming it Zaire along the way). As his regime came apart in the 1990s, so did the storage facility of the National Museum of Zaire, located in the grounds of one of his presidential palaces. When Laurent Kabila fought his way to power in 1997 and drove Mobutu into exile, looting became promiscuous.

‘If our ancestors were good enough to make [beautiful] objects, we are good enough to look after them,’ the Zimbabwean curator Raphael Chikukwa has argued. ‘You can’t steal my bicycle and say you’ll only return it when I have built a garage.’²¹ The view that European museums are the best guardians of Africa’s treasures until it has comparable institutions of its own was weakened by the discovery in 2023 that more than 1,500 objects at the British Museum – a top-of-the-range bike shed – had gone missing. In the meantime, money for museums with modern conservation standards has been flowing to West Africa. The Museum of Black Civilisations in Senegal, which opened in 2018, was built with

Chinese financing; the new National Museum of the DRC in Kinshasa, which opened the following year, was funded by South Korea. France, among others, has pledged grants and loans to the Republic of Benin for refurbishment of the royal palace at Abomey and a museum where the pieces from Quai Branly, it's hoped, will eventually be housed. Private foundations – including Mellon, Soros, Ford – have pitched in, along with Germany's international development agency, for a Museum of West African Art in Nigeria, which opened in 2025 in Benin City. If it turns out well, the museum could be a permanent home for repatriated artefacts from Europe and the US, or a space where they can appear by request. If it doesn't, western donors will sit on their hands as European development aid is diverted into defence spending and owners of prized objects will continue to make the most of their assets. 'In 2007,' according to the website Auction Daily, 'Sotheby's sold a Benin head sculpture for \$4.7 million. The winning bidder later purchased another Benin bronze for \$13.8 million in a private sale.'²²

Not everyone calling for repatriation believes that the objects in question should go to African museums. Why not return them directly to descendants of the original owners and allow them to do what they like with them? This position, too, keeps western curators awake at night. In 2023 the bronzes that Germany believed it was returning to the Nigerian government were handed by the contracting party in Abuja into the keeping of the oba of Benin, Ewuare II. A minority of Nigerian and European curators suspect that the royal dynasty in Benin City might turn out to be a more dependable guardian than politicians in a country racked by strife and graft. But dyed-in-the-wool anti-restitutionists see these transfers as proof of a decolonial potlatch at the West's expense. They have unlikely allies in the radical, New York-based Restitution Study Group, which argues that the Benin bronzes at the Smithsonian belong to the descendants of slaves in the African diaspora, sold to white traders by the oba's predecessors. 'Don't transfer Benin bronzes to Nigeria and slave trader heirs,' the RSG argued in 2022 against the Smithsonian's de-accession. 'Most were made ... in exchange for enslaved people! Save them for heirs of the enslaved!' The suggestion is that they should stay where they are, as hostages of the African diaspora, until further notice.

One release that Brussels may soon sign off to the DRC is its itemised collection of human remains from the Belgian Congo, more than 400 body

parts, held in various federal research institutes and museums in Belgium. But even this is fraught. Not everyone in DRC wants their abducted dead to be brought home. In 2018 the universities of Geneva and Lubumbashi signed an agreement for the restitution of seven 'pygmy' skeletons. They were dug up in Wamba, in north-eastern DRC, in the 1950s by a Swiss eugenicist. But descendants of these dead fear that a physical restitution would bring on metaphysical disaster. In 2023, at a colloquium in DRC on stolen remains, Wamba's customary chief, Alexandre Medjedje, suggested that Geneva wanted to cast out the restless forces they embodied and repatriate them to Congo along with the bones. 'Do these spirits not haunt you,' he asked, 'so that you decide today to [return] these ghosts to us?'²³

The paths to restitution are unpredictable. Lumumba and two of his colleagues were killed at night in a forest an hour's drive from Élisabethville (now Lubumbashi) in Katanga in 1961. They were buried in haste. The killers and their Belgian minders were right to worry that their crime might come to light and lead to a widespread nationalist upheaval. Days after the murders, a party was sent to dig up the bodies and bury them nearby, but deeper. Finally it was decided that they had to disappear completely. Gerard Soete, a former colonial police commissioner, was assigned to disinter them and dissolve them in acid. He saved a few identifiable remains, perhaps as evidence that the job was done. One was a gold-crowned tooth from Lumumba's mouth, which he took back to Belgium; like Émile Storms, he had a man cave where he kept his trophies. When he died, his daughter Godelieve acquired the tooth and eventually went public in 2016; Ludo De Witte filed a complaint, and it was confiscated by the police. Six years later the Belgian prime minister handed it over in a ceremony in Brussels to Lumumba's daughter Juliana. From Brussels, the tooth was flown to Kinshasa, where it was laid in a mausoleum as a relic of a desolate moment in Africa's transition to independence. After the mausoleum was vandalised in 2024 the tooth was transferred to the care of Lumumba's descendants.

Part II

Unauthorised Versions

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This Site Is Under Reconstruction: Albert Camus and Kamel Daoud

December 1938 in a large provincial city.¹ It's the last chance for the council to agree the municipal budget; in the chamber a reporter from the local paper tries to wring a bit of fun from a drab occasion. As a dignitary ploughs through a lengthy preamble, restless councillors begin to doodle (one makes a paper windmill from the minutes of an earlier meeting). A few days later an inquiry opens into a gas explosion caused by a leak in the mains. The same reporter heads for the scene. Here he's a stickler for detail: medium-sized pipe, weight forty to fifty kilograms, linking the mains to a pressure valve; width of fissure 323 mm. The gas company blames the burst on subsidence, but he thinks it may be trying to swing the inquiry in its favour. In February he delivers a mind-numbing tract on grain and grape harvests the previous year. At the end he announces he'll be back shortly with more of the same once the session on the citrus harvest is underway.²

When Albert Camus filed these pieces, he had already joined and left the Communist Party, where he got a sketchy education in the thrills and pitfalls of the militant's life, plunging into agitprop theatre and play readings in the suburbs of Algiers. He wasn't a good communist: he'd been disabused by *Retour de l'URSS* (1936), André Gide's unsparing account of socialism in one country, and didn't share the party's hostility to the first stirrings of nationalism in Algeria. He'd begun work on a novel and a set of essays when he was denounced as a Trotskyist and expelled from the party in the autumn of 1937. He continued dreaming up theatre projects and writing, but money was tight. He was an ambitious twenty-four-year-old, filing index cards and plotting graphs as a meteorologist's assistant at the Institute of Geophysics in Algiers when a job came up at a new city paper.

The first issue of *Alger républicain*, a broadsheet of the left, appeared in October 1938. Camus's reports on the Algiers municipal budget and the mains leak were published at the end of the year. He also had an

editorial/reviewing slot, 'Le Salon de lecture', where he wrote about *La Conspiration* by Paul Nizan (1938), and two other works of fiction – *La Nausée* (1938) and *Le Mur* (1939) – by Jean-Paul Sartre. The pieces on Nizan and Sartre are often quoted, unlike his review of La Pasionaria's speeches and writings (not 'a great book' despite the 'unforgettable' voice of a 'lucid militant'). Camus the ex-communist was still firmly on the left, with a youthful hunger for novelty, pace, verve. He detected a stiffness in the limbs when it came to most French novelists and film directors. Reviewing a book about American cinema, he sees its 'immense superiority' and laments that 'our best French directors all share the same fault': their work is 'slow in the telling – and this slowness is precisely that of the novelist who has not mastered his art'. Jorge Amado, by contrast, has what it takes. Camus is exhilarated by Amado's *Jubiabá* (1935), which is 'magnificent and stunning', 'fecund': 'Once again the novelists of the Americas make us feel the emptiness and artifice of our own fiction.'

Reviews of Brazilian novels and reports about gas leaks would not have been right for *Chroniques algériennes 1939–1958*, a collection of highly politicised pieces about the state of Algeria, carefully chosen by Camus and published by Gallimard in 1958. A superb translation by Arthur Goldhammer appeared more than half a century later, with an introduction by Alice Kaplan.³ Camus was rightly proud of his work for *Alger républicain*. The reports he chose from the end of the 1930s are models of advocacy journalism. Kaplan has appended a powerful sketch from the same period about a convict transport ship.

From 1940 onwards Camus was effectively exiled from Algeria, having left for metropolitan France and become cut off from North Africa by the war. (Henceforth, apart from occasional visits, Algeria would remain a distant prospect, on which he gazed with ever greater dismay.) By 1943 he was living in Paris and working for Gallimard. In the last five months of the German occupation he was also running *Combat*, the 'unified' Resistance journal, which he continued to edit until 1947. *Algerian Chronicles* includes several pieces from *Combat*, prompted by the 'disturbances' in Algeria in the towns of Sétif and Guelma in 1945. The police fired on a crowd; riots followed and settlers were massacred; vengeance was swift and disproportionate. Sétif was a key moment in the anti-colonial struggle and Camus is at pains to explain the grievances behind the surge of violence against the settlers.

In the mid-1950s he began writing for *L'Express*. By now the Algerian liberation movement, the Front de libération nationale (FLN), had launched its armed struggle, the war was on in earnest, and *L'Express* had several issues seized for its coverage of the French army's brutal methods. The best of Camus's articles here frame the 'Algerian problem' in stark terms: the settlers must choose 'between the politics of reconquest and the politics of reform' and not mistake the second for 'surrender'; the real surrender – the moral capitulation – is French injustice in the territory, which has brought about the insurrection. Yet Camus never confronts the starker possibility, that independence might be inevitable. He could conceive it only in terms of 'losing' Algeria, a disastrous outcome, in his view, for nearly a million settlers and 8 million Arabs and Amizagh (or 'Berbers'). For the sake of simplicity, I'll refer to the colonised population from now on as 'Algerians', even though Algerian nationality didn't exist until independence in 1962.

Algerian Chronicles was not a success when it appeared. Camus was by then in no-man's-land. As a critic of colonialism and opponent of independence, he had dug himself an inconvenient hole, too shallow to protect him from the crossfire of the Algerian war, but too deep for him to clamber out and make an expedient dash for one or another front, even if he'd wanted to. For several years he'd been explaining to anyone who would listen that 'Arab' violence was as cruel as the oppressor's; for much longer he had inveighed against the colonial regime and the settlers for their abuse of Algerians. Perhaps this is why he is still sometimes referred to as an 'anti-colonialist', yet decolonisation in the sense we understand it, with a full handover of powers, was not what he proposed. He felt that France and its overseas departments in Algeria should come to a new federal arrangement and the settlers should remain, but on an equal footing with Algerians.

The closing pieces in *Algerian Chronicles* are mostly appeals for precisely such a third way, written in the thick of an asymmetrical war whose violence nonetheless tarnished both sides and ruled out any prospect of a Mediterranean intellectual, as Camus thought of himself, riding to the rescue. He argued passionately for a truce that would spare civilians. If both parties were committed to a fight to the death, it should resemble a duel on the edge of town, with noncombatants out of harm's way. This was a doomed idea. Civilian casualties were in the hundreds of thousands, and after eight years of conflict Algeria had lost the same proportion of its

population as France had during the 1914–18 war. Camus failed to make the case for peace and federation; by the time *Algerian Chronicles* appeared he was a castaway, held afloat not by his reputation as a thinker but by his renown as a novelist and playwright.

He had also been a great journalist. His reports for *Alger républicain* from the Amizagh region of Kabylia on a famine in 1939 hit hard at the colonial administration for its indifference to ‘the indescribable penury of the Kabyle peasantry’. Handouts, Camus explains, were pitiful, at around 12 litres of grain – less than a week’s supply – every two or three months for a family of six or seven. When local communes opted for ‘charity workshops’ where the destitute were put to work, the scheme was used to retrieve tax from people in arrears: what they owed was deducted from the cash component of the wage. ‘There are no words harsh enough,’ he wrote, ‘to condemn such cruelty.’ Because he understood the markets in grain and fruit, and the way the government could set the price to fleece the producer, the comprehensive New Deal-style plan he put forward for the rehabilitation of the region looked authoritative and plausible. It included a proposal for the distribution of 200,000 hectares of land to poor Kabyles.

Camus liked to harangue the settlers, whose behaviour reflected the structural injustices of colonialism. All the same, he felt that certain misconceptions in metropolitan France needed straightening out. The *pieds noirs* were not, as the press suggested, ‘a million whip-wielding, cigar-chomping colonists driving around in Cadillacs’; 80 per cent were small businessmen or workers whose wages were well below regional thresholds in the poorest parts of France. Social security benefits for poor whites in Algeria were less than half the value of these in France. Did the *bien-pensant* media in Paris really believe these people were ‘colonial profiteers’? Weren’t they simply being pilloried, he asked, ‘to expiate the immense sins of French colonisation’?

By 1945 Camus had published *L’Étranger*, two plays – *Caligula* and *Le Malentendu* – and *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, his famous book about the absurd, suicide, revolt, theatre, Kierkegaard, Husserl, Heidegger, the Don Juan syndrome – you name it. As a Resistance figure at *Combat* he had distinguished himself, but in the new mood of polarisation he was uncomfortable and tetchy. He had become part of the furniture at Gallimard; he had been praised by Maurice Blanchot and Sartre on the publication of *L’Étranger*, and Sartre had taken to him. He had begun a new draft of *La*

Peste (Sartre liked it), which would clinch his success when it appeared in 1947. But all the while he'd been spoiling for a fight. He remained staunchly on the left: a boy from a poor background whose intimacy with the class injustices that preoccupied Sartre and his colleagues was never in question. Yet his anticommunism was hardening, and when he invoked his own working-class background in conversation they were exasperated, just as he was by their condescension.

For Sartre, Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty, anti-communism was out of the question in the wake of the Nazi occupation. In the dugout at *Les Temps modernes* it was regarded as an elementary mistake that handed the initiative to a defeated enemy, tainted by collaboration but rapidly regrouping as the new postwar order took shape. Camus's legendary estrangements in Paris had more to do with anti-communism than communism itself: Sartre and Merleau-Ponty were far from being communists at the time – the party was vigorously denouncing Sartre – but they were assiduous anti-anti-communists doing their best to keep the ball in play.

A chapter from *Humanism and Terror* – Merleau-Ponty's cold-eyed piece of anti-anti-communist reasoning – upset Camus when it appeared in 1946 in *Les Temps modernes* ahead of the book's publication.⁴ In the excerpt, Merleau-Ponty took issue with Arthur Koestler, Camus's new friend, whose disillusion with the communism was anything but frivolous. Sartre and his colleagues saw Koestler as a figure to be reckoned with; he was by all accounts a well-wisher and now a charismatic presence on the scene in Paris, planning a move to France. But his confidence that no revolution could survive a 'terror' – a conclusion Merleau-Ponty was struggling to avoid – had narrowed the margin for the home team at *Les Temps modernes*. To Camus, Merleau-Ponty's views on the October Revolution were beginning to look like parlour-Bolshevik extenuations of the Soviet Union. In fact, Merleau-Ponty's main preoccupation was how to keep 'reason' alive when 'history' and 'progress' were tested past the limit by labour camps, show trials and the like; it was a case, as usual, of what position not to occupy. But Camus went for Merleau-Ponty as though he were a sworn enemy.

The story of Camus's falling-out with Sartre is now as famous as the crime Meursault commits on the beach in *L'Étranger*. No one at *Les Temps modernes* liked *L'Homme révolté* when it appeared in 1951. It was a

celebrity platform on which Camus ascended majestically, using the ills of the Soviet Union as a pulley-system: his targets included Marxism, the Bolsheviks, Robespierre and the very notion of revolution (this last item came as a shock in France). The alternative was ‘rebellion’, a state of mind achieved, apparently, by internalising real contradictions in the world – meaning and absurdity, justice and travesty, violence and moderation – and emerging with a kind of ethical digest that guides our judgements and tells us how to act; for Camus, the rest was totalitarianism. It seemed at the time both lofty and a little vague and Sartre didn’t buy it, but he was duty-bound to have the book reviewed.

After much hesitation he assigned it to Francis Jeanson, a former colleague at *Alger républicain* (and later a clandestine courier in France for the FLN). Jeanson took Camus apart. He saw his ‘thirst for moderation’ as a narcissistic abdication of reason. Why prefer this nebulous, internalised ‘rebellion’ to real collective action? And why on earth compare the execution of Louis XVI to the Passion of Christ? Camus had become a tormented literary grandee whose personal agony, in Jeanson’s view, had no bearing on reality. Camus’s reply to Jeanson, published in *Les Temps modernes*, was followed by a brutal denunciation from Sartre. Did Camus imagine he was alone in finding Stalin’s massive repression unacceptable? (‘Oui, Camus, je trouve comme vous ces camps inadmissibles.’) How perverse on Camus’s part – and what a gift to the aggressive new Atlanticism – to have joined the anti-communist chorus when Europe’s future hung between capitalism and socialism, and the Viet Minh were fighting for independence in Indochina: ‘If we apply your principles, the Viet Minh are colonised and therefore slaves, but because they are communists they must be tyrants at the same time.’ Sartre, the anti-anti-communist and anti-colonialist, now saw his friend in the light of the Cold War as both an anti-communist and a budding anti-anti-colonialist. His attack contained ad hominem passages of the harshest kind. Camus was filled with anguish, not only about the book he’d written but about his ability to write at all. Then in 1954, when Beauvoir published *Les Mandarins*, he reacted to the character of Henri Perron – editor, writer, two-timing lover – as a treacherous put-down.⁵ There is plenty in Perron that resembles Camus, but Perron is also an exquisite corpse, in which parts of the composite are borrowed from Sartre and reassigned. All the same, Camus was incensed. The new boy who had arrived in the capital to such

acclaim in the 1940s was now convinced he had been subjected to a thorough Parisian hazing.

But the low-key reception of *Algerian Chronicles* was not just to do with the fact that Camus had disappointed his eloquent friends. The bigger problem was the timing. By 1958 he had got nowhere with his appeals for a ‘civilian truce’ or moderation on both sides and he had decided on silence. The book was meant to be a pointed exit from the conversation: the early dispatches he included would surely remind his former friends in Paris – ‘bistro’ anti-colonialists, as he called them now, at a comfortable remove from the violence they condoned – how thoroughly he’d known Algeria and how strongly he’d objected to the white man’s dealings with the ‘natives’.

Algerian Chronicles was in production at Gallimard when *La Question*, Henri Alleg’s devastating book about the use of torture in Algeria, appeared out of the blue from Les Editions de Minuit.⁶ Minuit’s credentials were impeccable. It was founded in 1941 as a clandestine venture, when Gallimard was treading a fine line with the Germans: *La Nouvelle revue française*, which Gallimard published, was openly collaborationist, and it was shut down after the Liberation. Fourteen years on, a former underground publisher had come out with a story of interrogation worthy of the dark days of occupation, only to see the title suppressed by the censor. The colonial war in Algeria suddenly struck a sombre and familiar chord.

Like Camus and Jeanson, Alleg had been a journalist at *Alger républicain*. He’d originally moved from France to Algeria to teach, but by 1951, long after Camus’s brief stint, he was running the paper. In 1955 – one year into what was then a full-scale war of liberation declared by the FLN – the authorities closed in and shut it down. It had been too sympathetic to Indigenous grievances; and under Alleg, it had become a Communist asset to all intents and purposes. Alleg went into hiding shortly after the paper ceased publication. He was arrested in 1957 and tortured for several weeks – burns, electric shocks and waterboarding, as it’s now known – but wouldn’t give away the names of the people who’d sheltered him when he’d gone to ground. The manuscript of *La Question* was smuggled out of a military hospital where he was recovering after his interrogation. His memoir of torture became famous overnight in France, and for many waverers it put paid to the notion of a compromise in Algeria.

By comparison with *La Question*, a lot of the later pieces in *Algerian Chronicles* looked like metropolitan op-ed. It didn’t help that Alleg, along

with many non-Indigenous communists who'd gone to the wire for independence, was a party man enrolled in a historic struggle that *L'Homme révolté* had written off as grandiose and murderous. If Alleg had been the kind of self-reflexive, transcendent rebel Camus favoured, he would almost certainly have been spared the torture chamber, but his involvement with the Algerian Communist Party meant that he was committed to independence alongside the FLN (which later forced the Algerian party to dissolve). The French Communist Party, on the contrary, had voted for the 'special powers' proposed by Guy Mollet's government in Paris, which effectively handed the running of Algeria to the French military in 1956. And here was a rare irony in the uninflected fight Camus had picked. When he'd been a communist in the 1930s, he'd grasped that the French party line was no use to the oppressed Algerian population: despite the Third International's support for anti-colonial struggles, the French Communist Party thought dictatorship of the proletariat in a French Algeria was preferable to national liberation for an inchoate people still in formation. And then in 1945, as Camus set out in *Combat* to show why Algerians had risen up after a century of subjection and murdered 103 Europeans in Sétif, the party denounced the new anti-colonial fervour as a 'Hitlerian' tendency; many communists took part in the revenge attacks, resulting in at least 15,000 Algerian deaths. A *pied noir* with a rare sympathy for the Arabs and Amizagh, Camus had always had more reason to distrust the communists than the editors at *Les Temps modernes* gave him credit for.

At the heart of this dispute was the problem of violence. Much has been said about why Sartre – or Jeanson or Alleg – could countenance it, while Camus found it repellent. In the 1940s he had excused violence as a grim French necessity in the face of defeat and German occupation; it was not the servant of a grand idea. Yet in the editorials he wrote or approved for *Combat*, the Resistance took on a grand dimension as a synonym for freedom and a prelude to workers' democracy. The onset of the Cold War suited Camus: it meant he was no longer in two minds. He could draw a line under the Resistance and denounce the use of force in the name of any idea – communism, imperialism, anti-colonialism – as fiercely as he denounced its use against civilians in Algeria. He could wag a reproachful finger at Gamal Abdel Nasser's nationalist project in Egypt and rail against the Soviet invasion of Hungary. Henceforth he was a left-wing libertarian at odds with progressive (i.e., communist) versions of history. 'All the dead,'

he wrote in *L'Express*, in a lament for Algeria, 'belong to the same tragic family.' It was this all-in-one humanism that had worried Merleau-Ponty and seemed to Camus's former friends to blur the contours of the anti-colonial struggle. Camus could never conjugate violence and 'history' with the frightening fluency of his detractors in the anti-anti-communist camp.

On the eve of Algerian independence in 1962, two years after Camus's fatal car crash, the busy, dialectical Sartre was on the move, having sublimated his torment about the gulag to become a respectable (and ponderous) fellow-traveller. He remained a dogged anti-colonialist. Camus, for his part, had barely changed his position after their falling out. By the time he accepted the Nobel Prize in 1957 he was a statuesque figure: spurned voice of reason on Algeria, fervent anti-communist, bringer of Mediterranean light to the overcast north of European philosophy. As Sartre turned his attention to Vietnam in the wake of Algerian independence and refused a Nobel award, Camus the moralist seemed lost to posterity, buried along with the man.

Camus's rare journalistic forays in defence of the settlers were well and good, and he had a point, but with the exception of *L'Étranger*, his terse little shocker which exonerates no one, he made the case much better in his fiction. *Le Premier homme*, published thirty-four years after his death, is a deeply sympathetic portrait of a poor settler family – his own family – in Algeria.⁷ If Sartre and his circle had lived to read it, they might have forgiven Camus for brandishing his proletarian credentials in Paris. In *La Peste*, Rieux the doctor is a model of fortitude (a good novel with an irreproachable citizen at its centre – how hard is that to write?). But there is also an intriguing figure in 'The Adulterous Woman', a short story drafted in the 1950s, around the time Camus was writing for *L'Express*. Janine, the middle-aged wife of a travelling salesman, is an unusual settler: alert, observant, torn between two worlds and drawn, in an obscure, tremulous way, to the colonised population, even if she can't connect with them in a 'kingdom eternally promised to her' but which, she comes to realise during a trip to the desert, 'would never be hers'. While her husband disparages the Algerians, she is impressed by the 'pride' and independent bearing of the people around her – more impressed than Edward Said was prepared to acknowledge when he wrote about this story in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993). Deep in the south of the country, while her husband is asleep in their hotel, she returns to a fort they'd visited in daylight and gazes across

an exhilarating expanse of desert. The stars seem to tumble in slow motion towards the horizon and she feels a lifelong malaise – an oppressive fear, mingled with regret – beginning to lift. It's a more or less erotic moment that leaves her lying on her back on a chilly terrace.

'The Adulterous Woman', one of six stories in *Exile and the Kingdom* (1957), makes a virtue of Janine's attention to the world around her and conjures a version of the settler mentality that Camus felt to be in short supply. We sense colonised people coming alive before her eyes, whether they're intimidating men striding towards her in a windswept square or tiny figures in the distance, eking a heroic livelihood from rubble and sand. And even though there was plenty to fear in the behaviour of the colonised when *Exile and the Kingdom* was published – at the height of the war – she's ready to come to terms with these fears, as she might, in more propitious circumstances, come to terms with the colonised themselves. For Camus, Janine embodies the possibility of a good outcome in Algeria, even if she represents only half of the equation.

At the same time, we're still in the ambiguous, sexualised confines of the colonial imagination, just as we were with Adela Quested's strange turn in the Marabar Caves. Camus is clumsier than E. M. Forster and the two moments are worlds apart – a French Algerian fugue across breathtaking spaces, a bout of very British claustrophobia in a granite chamber – but they have one striking feature in common: the native only becomes an insistent presence when he isn't there. In *A Passage to India* (1924), Dr Aziz is not in the cave where Adela hallucinates his sexual advances; in 'The Adulterous Woman', the noble, self-sufficient men of the south, who broke through a veil of dust to appear so vividly to Janine, are now hidden by the night, far below the fort, as she gives herself to the continent that belongs to them. Camus couldn't find a place for real colonised persons to live and breathe in his fiction.

This is a longstanding objection to *La Peste* (1947). Conor Cruise O'Brien felt that the 'native question is simply abolished' by the absence of Algerians from the novel, even though we assume they're dying in larger numbers than the French.⁸ Things had gone downhill for Camus, O'Brien argued, since *L'Étranger*, where at least he recognised their existence, even if they were 'silent, nameless, faceless Arabs' and one of them got shot to death by a distracted white man on a beach.

Neocolonial wars in the Middle East have not helped Camus's reputation as a dead white-settler male. He is a more divisive figure now than he was in his lifetime. In 2010 the writer Yasmina Khadra – ex-Algerian army, real name Mohammed Moulessehoul – backed a proposal for a 'Camus caravan' to tour Algeria and reacquaint the country with its Nobel homeboy. The idea fell apart under a barrage of angry scepticism from Algerian intellectuals and academics, who see him unequivocally as a colonial writer, and technically French. Why regard him as Algerian, one of them asked, when many Jews and Europeans who'd thrown in their lot with the FLN weren't honoured with the new nationality in 1962?

In France, the Camus problem is very much worse. He has never been a national treasure in the style of Sartre or André Malraux. The Bibliothèque Nationale has put on shows about Sartre (safe) and Guy Debord (charming), but nothing comparable for Camus, who can still stir up primitive sentiments or – like all good humanists – suddenly find himself on the guest list at an event he'd have wished to avoid. In 2009 in a fit of hubris, French president Nicolas Sarkozy tried to have Camus's remains transferred to the Panthéon. There were many objectors, led by Camus's son, Jean, who argued that his father was not at ease with the trappings of national identity, and in the end the plan was abandoned.

In 2013, the centenary of Camus's birth, a major exhibition was planned in Aix-en-Provence. Benjamin Stora, a historian of the Maghreb (and the Algerian war), was put in charge, only to be shown the door a few months later. Stora, close at the time to the Socialist Party, was a good choice for the Ministry of Culture if they were to provide funding for the show, which seemed to be the plan. But he didn't suit the mayor of Aix, an eccentric figure on the right of the UMP (Union pour un Mouvement Populaire) who had no qualms about electoral alliances with the Front National. Stora wanted the exhibition to include material on the Algerian war (there was talk of screening Gillo Pontecorvo's *Battle of Algiers*). The mayor was appalled, and so were the vengeful little groups in Aix who have her attention. More than 3 million *pièdes noirs* and their descendants live in France today, from a repatriated stock of about 750,000. Most of them are in the south, drawn – as Camus was – to warm climates, and many are Janines, who understand that what they were promised did not belong to them. A handful nurse the grievances of their parents and grandparents; fewer still are old enough to remember the bitterness of independence at

first hand. These last two groups are known as *nostalgériques*, people who pine for the place in the sun they were forced to abandon.

In Aix the loudest objections to Stora came from *nostalgérique* activists who support the descendants of colonial extremists in the Organisation de l'Armée Secrète – the OAS – and lobby against the commemoration of Algerian independence. The mayor of Aix took exception to local independence celebrations in 2012, and according to Stora she thought nothing of renaming a road in Aix after Jean Bastien-Thiry, the anti-independence air force officer who was executed in 1963 for a failed attempt on De Gaulle's life. (Google Maps will alert us to a rue Bastien-Thiry in Aix if the *nostalgériques* ever get their way.)⁹

The mayor and her entourage of self-styled 'French Algerians' had no objection to a Camus show, as long as it portrayed independence as a fact rather than a desirable outcome, but Stora – born in Algeria to Jewish parents – was not the man to weigh this fine distinction. 'An Israelite from Constantine', he was roundly loathed, as one eloquent local put it last year, by the 'French Algerian community' in Aix. After Stora left, his hapless successor resigned. A half-hearted, underfunded exhibition – a perfect expression of the national attitude to Camus – went ahead in Aix, bankrolled mostly by the mayor's tax base.

Camus brûlant, the short book Stora and his colleague (who also left) wrote about the exhibition scandal and the 'capture' of Camus by various hostage-takers – in Algeria, the Elysée and Aix – depicts him as a brilliant left-wing misfit with a rebellious anarcho-syndicalist impulse which threw him clear of the wreckage in every ideological struggle of the twentieth century, including Bolshevism, Spanish fascism, Nazism, colonial revanchism and Algerian nationalism under arms.¹⁰ *Camus brûlant* is an astute, elliptical book that tracks Camus from his days as a communist to his sanctification as a liberal icon along the lines of George Orwell. But once the media had boiled off the last nuances, Stora's Camus had been reinvented as a Christ-child whose noble aversions were all of a piece and apparent on day one in the manger.

In the summer of 2013, as tempers were cooling, the Algerian writer Kamel Daoud (b. 1970) turned up the heat again with his extraordinary novel, *Meursault, contreenquête*.¹¹ Daoud's Algerian narrator, Haroun, is in his twenties in July 1962 when he kills a French settler during the vengeful

aftermath of independence. Haroun and his mother have moved away from Algiers to live in a deadbeat coastal town between Oran and the capital and, as the Europeans depart, mother and son have taken over a nearby house vacated by a family of settlers. They're disturbed late at night by Joseph, a terrified Frenchman, returning to his relatives' property to escape the wave of post-independence violence against the Europeans. Egged on by his crone of a mother, Haroun fires two rounds at Joseph and buries him the same night.

The killing is not the crisis of the novel but its resolution: we've known from the start that Haroun's older brother, Moussa, was shot dead on a beach in 1942 – the year *L'Étranger* was published – by a settler who went on to become famous. Moussa's body was never found, his name never mentioned in court records or brief reports in the press. But the name of the criminal is Meursault, one half of a much-admired pantomime horse – part author, part protagonist – that won itself a reputation with a memorable crime at the sea's edge. Haroun's only option turns out to be an eye for an eye.

When the novel opens, he is already an ageing drunk in a bar in Oran going back over the details of the original crime with a student at work on a Camus thesis. Years earlier there had been another academic, a good-looking woman who arrived on his doorstep and alerted him to the fact that his brother was murdered by a settler. She introduced him to *L'Étranger*; he fell in love with her as she took him through the novel and he learned proficiency in French in order to read it. The affair ended badly, as everything had since Moussa was killed and M'ma (the mother) required Haroun to live in the confines of her grief. Haroun's is very much a mother-son story, as Meursault's is. Where Camus begins, 'My mother died today', Haroun begins, 'Mama is still alive today'.¹² In Daoud's novel, lines or passages are lifted from *L'Étranger* and left to stand, or tweaked for the occasion. Haroun plays a knife-edge game of identification and counter-identification with Meursault, the murderous colonising other, and soon enough we realise we're reading both novels at the same time.

Like *Vendredi*, Michel Tournier's subaltern rewrite of *Robinson Crusoe*, *Meursault, contre-enquête* wrests the narrative away from the settler.¹³ In his fruitless search through *L'Étranger* for a sign of his brother's name, Haroun encounters the word 'Arab' twenty-five times, while the indignity of namelessness is driven home by a sense that Algeria before

independence had any number of Meursaults: killing an unidentified Arab was a minor distinction for a settler. Nevertheless, the narrator despises the 'liberation' regime (still in place after more than sixty years) and the Islamist alternative, which emerged in the 1990s and was driven from electoral victory into a long civil war. The FLN has 'eaten' the country, Haroun feels, and the new minarets appearing everywhere are like mould proliferating on the remains of a feast. In a strong Camusian undertow, Joseph and Moussa are murdered Abels, members of the same tragic family founded by the colonial encounter. Haroun, like Meursault, was bound by his colonial destiny to be Cain.

An FLN officer fresh from the maquis interrogates Haroun about the murder of Joseph, but just as Meursault was on trial for a moral shortcoming rather than a killing, so Haroun is under suspicion chiefly because he failed to join the FLN at the time of the war. His interrogator reminds him that his deed would have been heroic before the ceasefire, but not now, 'not this week!' (About 3,000 French settlers who stayed on after the ceasefire were murdered.) Haroun is released but he's puzzled: he has wasted away his youth as a bereaved outsider living, and eventually killing, in the shadow of M'ma, just as Meursault lived and killed in the shadow of Maman. He is still enraged by the canonical status of the Meursault/Camus circus duo, clumping around to great applause, yet now that the satisfaction of avenging Moussa is dwindling away, he finds himself brooding over the lonely infamy of taking a life and walking free: it's his own version of Camusian absurdity.

We think back to the beach as it figures in both novels and recall that Meursault couldn't see his victim clearly at the moment of the shooting. Scouring the shoreline for a trace of his dead brother, Haroun too is blinded by sweat and salt: he seems to pick out a form that might have been Moussa, but it's tenuous. We remember Meursault, vision impaired, senses stunned by the afternoon sun, and the revolver in hand. Twenty years later, when Haroun's turn comes around, he finds the murder weapon concealed in a scarf, perhaps something belonging to his mother, perhaps a bit of European tat left by Joseph's family. Once he's unwrapped it, he grasps its prophetic state of readiness, primed for the kill like 'a dog with one nostril'. He can't see his victim all that well in the darkness of the barn and so, of course, the crime committed in the dead of night resembles the crime committed in broad daylight. What distinguishes them is that one killer

knows the identity of his victim and the other doesn't. Referring to Moussa simply as 'the Arab' made killing him as easy as 'killing time', Haroun concludes. But surely Camus knew this. It was a mistake, he wrote in *Combat* after the events in Sétif, to imagine the Algerian people didn't really 'exist': they were 'suffering from hunger' and 'demanding justice', but they weren't 'the wretched, faceless mob in which westerners see nothing worth respecting or defending'.

Postscript 2025

Kamel Daoud made his name as a brilliant journalist ahead of his success as a novelist. In his late teens, he stepped away from the mosque after a brief romance with Islam and a few years later began writing for *Le Quotidien d'Oran*. He produced the most widely read column in Algeria and went on to become the paper's editor-in-chief, holding the post through the long and bloody civil war. By the time it ended, his reticence about religion had hardened. He had no time for the Algerian ruling party or for the country's Islamists. With the success of *Meursault, contre-enquête* in France, he upped his polemical game. In 2014 he started writing regularly for the French weekly *Le Point*. In the same year, after he appeared on a late-night chat show on French TV, a Salafist imam called on the Algerian regime to execute him in public for conducting a 'war on God, his Prophet, his Book', and on 'Muslims and their countries'.

Daoud's patience with bigotry was wearing thin. After the rampage in Cologne on New Year's Eve 2015, mostly by young Muslim men, he showed his hand in a piece for *Le Monde*. Beware of male asylum-seekers from majority-Muslim states, he argued; they come from societies that see the freedom of women in the West as a 'whimsical' sign of 'its cult of liberty', which needs to be disciplined. He tried half-heartedly to point the finger at Islamism for the violence in Cologne, but came down in the end against Muslim cultures in general, which encouraged an 'unhealthy relationship to women, to the body, to desire'.¹⁴ The distinction between Islamists and non-Islamists hardly mattered to a traumatised German public, and in due course Daoud couldn't be bothered with it.

France had already honoured him as an eloquent defender of secular Republican values. In 2020, he was granted French nationality. Citizen Daoud was now freer than ever to speak his mind and *Le Point* was his pulpit. In 2023 he described Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the leader of La France Insoumise (LFI), as a ‘sheikh’ who was busily ‘self-islamicising’ in order to garner a left antisemitic vote. Daoud had spotted a fatal flaw in LFI’s pro-Palestinian position and done his best to maximise the damage. In 2024, he played his ace, suggesting that the far-right Rassemblement National’s lead candidate for elections to the European Parliament was preferable, on grounds of her Republican ‘clarity’, to a fiery candidate proposed by Mélenchon’s party. Both were women, one born in France to Algerian parents, the other in Syria.¹⁵ Daoud by now was a grand inquisitor, probing for ambivalence in Europe’s minority populations. His questions were thinly disguised beneath his rhetoric. Are you loyal, assimilated members of your host communities, as I am, or are you prey to the siren call of the anti-colonial imagination? From Africa. From Gaza. Can you have it both ways?

Unlike Camus, who never won it, Daoud was rewarded for his literary services to France with a Prix Goncourt in 2024 for *Houris*, a novel set during the civil war in Algeria (and banned by the regime in Algiers). But like Camus, Daoud managed the steep ascent from his Algerian origins to become a literary success in the metropole. Like Camus, who turned away from his early years as a card-carrying communist, Daoud renounced his teenage passion for Islam and later, his counter-colonial fascination with Algeria’s past, evoked with such eloquence in his rewriting of Camus’s novel.

4

Mangy-Dog in Mozambique: Bertina Lopes and Luís Bernardo Honwana

A few years ago, I opened up a box of books I'd left with friends in the 1980s, including a dozen novels and poetry collections in the Heinemann African Writers Series. The idea for AWS took shape at the end of the 1950s when Heinemann published Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. The series was launched in 1962, with Achebe as editorial adviser; by the time it hit the buffers in the early 2000s there were more than 360 titles. A handful of AWS writers, such as Wole Soyinka and Nadine Gordimer, had already been published elsewhere. Some, like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Bessie Head and Buchi Emecheta, saw their first major works published in the series. Others prospered briefly in the list before they fell on hard times. In the 1980s, when I met the Cameroonian writer Mbella Sonne Dipoko in Paris, he had three AWS titles to his name but he made a living cutting silhouette portraits for tourists outside the Pompidou Centre.

The book I'd hoped to rediscover but didn't was a collection of stories by a Mozambican author, Luís Bernardo Honwana, which first appeared in Lourenço Marques (now Maputo) during the colonial era, with gaunt monochrome illustrations by the Mozambican painter Bertina Lopes. *We Killed Mangy-Dog and Other Stories* was added to the AWS list in 1969 as a translation from Portuguese a few years before Mozambique won its independence, but without the original illustrations.¹ The lead story in the English edition introduces us to Mangy-Dog, an elderly white-haired stray with blue eyes and horrible scabs, who roams the streets outside the young narrator's school. Mangy-Dog is ostracised by other dogs and by almost all humans. His only friend is Isaura, the narrator's fellow pupil, another misfit, at the local school. 'She spent all her time with him,' the narrator tells us, 'giving him her lunch to eat and patting him. But then Isaura was crazy – everybody knew that.' The sight of Mangy-Dog is so objectionable that the local Portuguese administrator enlists a gang of boys, including the

narrator, to shoot it. Having led Mangy-Dog to the edge of the township on a rope, held by the tremulous narrator, the gang will take a while to summon up their courage.

Mangy-Dog, with his unmistakable colour coding – the blue eyes, the white hair – and his slow, ox-like movements of the head, struck me when I first read this story as a simulacrum of crumbling Portuguese rule. That's partly right, I suppose, but the story is too complicated to be a parable. And besides, why would the administrator decree the dog's death? Is colonialism so perverse that it can wilfully self-destruct? Or does the dog evoke a certain class of poor white settler – semiliterate, long disadvantaged in the metropole – who does no credit in the eyes of the administrator to Portugal's grand colonial enterprise? (Mozambicans sometimes referred to these people as 'kubvana', a term from the Ronga language that translates as 'rabble'.) 'What's the dog doing here, still alive?' the administrator asks as he drinks with his cronies on the veranda of the colonial club. 'It's so rotten that it makes one feel sick.'

As far as we can tell, the crew that's tasked to do away with Mangy-Dog is a motley bunch of white, Black and *mestiço* boys. Most are carrying weapons when they pass a group of Black Mozambican 'servants' who work for the owner of a local abattoir. Where are 'boss boys' going? the servants ask with a mixture of curiosity and alarm. One boss boy tells them to get lost – 'Black pigs!' – and turns his gun on them. We've discovered by now that the narrator is Black: he's known to the gang as Toucinho – 'Porky'. He is scorned by the others when he hesitates to take the first pop at Mangy-Dog, whose last resort is to claim a species affiliation with his human killers by shedding tears. Meanwhile Isaura, who has followed the boys into the bush, is beside herself with anguish.

The racist colonial culture that Portugal was presenting to the rest of the world as a progressive melting pot is very much in play here, and so by the time Isaura is torn away from Mangy-Dog and Toucinho pulls the trigger, we have seen a fluent process in which the empowered deliver the instructions, the semi-empowered bicker as they carry them out and the fully disempowered take the consequences. This hierarchy is more or less consistent with the places assigned to colonial subjects by skin pigment (lighter at the top, darker at the bottom). And paradoxically, Mangy-Dog is the anomaly that proves how thorough this system of social injustice is: his whiteness is a double curse, since it carries the trace of the decadent

colonial culture that can only come to a bad end; and at the same time, like albinism (a source of deep suspicion in many parts of Africa), it ensures that Mangy-Dog is shunned, even by the other village dogs. Murderous resentment enables the system, but there must always be a lowest of the low.

Honwana was twenty-two when his collection of stories was published in 1964. He was born to an Indigenous Mozambican family, so-called *indigénas*, that had risen to the rank of *assimilados*: Black and *mestiço* Mozambicans, that's to say, who were entitled to the same rights, in theory, that metropolitan Portuguese enjoyed under common law. A thorough inspection of your home, the production of baptismal records and other requirements made the transition from *indigéna* to *assimilado* extremely arduous, but the Honwana family qualified. Luís Bernardo's father, Raúl, was the author of a 'life history' that begins in the late colonial era and ends shortly after Mozambique's independence.²

Honwana Jr's book scandalised the settler notables in Lourenço Marques and the ministries in Lisbon. Duly arrested and sent to prison, he was one of many Mozambican intellectuals and artists shuttling in and out of detention during the 1960s. One reliable get-out-of-jail card was a course of study in Europe. Bertina Lopes avoided detention when the Gulbenkian Foundation whisked her away to Lisbon on a scholarship in the 1960s. Honwana talked his way out of Mozambique by enrolling in the metropole for a law degree. But anyone who took this route knew it was only a matter of time before the security forces in Portugal caught up with them. Bertina – as she signed her paintings – left for Rome while Honwana made his way from Lisbon to southern Africa and enlisted with Frelimo (Frente de Libertação de Moçambique), the armed liberation movement that eventually took power after independence in 1975. Bertina prospered in exile as a painter and a committed anti-colonial activist.

Frelimo was not yet a full-blooded Marxist movement. But already Honwana had a sharp materialist eye for flaws in Portuguese colonial ideology, which had grown more lenient – and disingenuous – since his father's youth in the 1920s and 1930s. In 'Dina', a sombre story in *We Killed Mangy-Dog*, a white overseer on a maize plantation pays a young Black woman for sex. He doesn't know that her elderly father, weeding the fields, has watched the transaction unfold or that he might find it troubling. 'Dina' is an oblique commentary on miscegenation, which – when

Honwana wrote the story – was no longer discouraged by Lisbon in the far-off Portuguese provinces (Portugal rejected the word ‘colony’ for its overseas holdings).

This top-down melting-pot inflection in Portugal’s imperialist doctrine took its cue from ‘lusotropicalism’, a transatlantic pseudo-ideology that emerged in the 1930s, advanced by the Brazilian anthropologist Gilberto Freyre. The Portuguese, in Freyre’s account, enjoyed a long multicultural history, going back more than a thousand years to their past in the Iberian peninsula, where they coexisted with Moors and Jews before the Christian ascendancy. As seafarers for more than 700 years they were ideally adapted to the tropics. Portugal’s version of manifest destiny, Freyre reckoned, was to mix and breed with other peoples, regardless of skin colour, and consolidate a transracial empire.³

Very few anti-colonial intellectuals in the colonies signed up to this view, and I doubt that Honwana was one of them.⁴ Even the Estado Novo – a crypto-fascist regime established in Portugal in 1933 – greeted Freyre’s ideas with ambivalence when they first did the rounds in the metropole: they were sidelined or opposed for more than a decade. But after 1945, faced with an international order that was calling for full decolonisation, the Estado Novo dusted down Freyre’s theories to make the case for Portugal’s exceptional status as a colonising power. By the late 1960s Franco Nogueira, Portugal’s former foreign minister, was arguing that only the Portuguese ‘brought to Africa the notion of human rights and racial equality. We alone practised the principle of multiracialism, which all now consider to be the most perfect and daring expression of human brotherhood and sociological progress.’⁵ A vision of racial harmony under blue skies – a saturated blue that Honwana didn’t trust – and parity under the mosquito net were Portugal’s strongest defence, as it claimed to fold settlers, administrators and natives into an ever-expansive communion of races.

The social division of labour, in contrast, had to be strictly enforced, which is why ‘Dina’ would have given less offence in colonial circles than ‘The Hands of the Blacks’: one of the gentler satires in Honwana’s collection, in which the narrator asks why the palms of Black people’s hands are white – a mystery for the feverish racial imagination, to which he’s become susceptible. After doing the rounds and finding none of the answers convincing, he turns to his mother. ‘God made blacks,’ she replies, ‘because they had to be. Afterwards,’ she goes on,

he regretted having made them because other men laughed at them and put them to serve like slaves or not much better. But because he couldn't make them all be white, since those who were used to seeing them black would complain, He made it so that the palms of their hands would be exactly like the palms of the hands of other men. And do you know why that was? ... it was to show that what people do is only the work of people ... That what they do is done by hands that are the same – hands of people who, if they had any sense, would know that first and foremost they are men. He must have been thinking of this when He made the hands of the blacks the same as the hands of those men who thank God that they're not black!' After telling me all this, my mother kissed my hands.

This is a seditious challenge to the economic *modus operandi* in the Portuguese colonies, which depended for decades on conscripted labour. Until the day when all native Mozambican and Black *indigénas* became bona fide *assimilados*, they were destined to perform far lowlier tasks than whites – an arrangement that they challenged at their peril. But full assimilation was a convenient Portuguese fantasy. In 1950, when Honwana's father Raúl was in his forties, there were about 6 million Indigenous inhabitants of Mozambique, of whom only 5,000 – 0.08 per cent – were registered *assimilados*.⁶ Although assimilationism persisted as a de facto mark of difference, the elevation of *indigénas* to *assimilados* was abandoned in the early 1960s. By then many young *assimilados* in Mozambique, Angola and Guinea-Bissau were taking an active interest in the anti-colonial movements.

The uneasy negotiation between whites, *mestiços*, *assimilados* and *indigénas* lies at the heart of Honwana's stories. It is closely (often cruelly) observed; his narrators' findings are noted in an offhand manner. Honwana's overarching vision is of class exploitation transposed to the colonial context, where it becomes visible as the ground in which finicky racial distinctions on the one hand and naked racism on the other take root. Mangy-Dog, for instance, is both a cur and more than a cur, although Honwana was too committed to the signature of his demotic prose, laden with repetitive cadences, and to the characters that spoke it, to opt for full-blown allegory. Better to imagine Mangy-Dog and even young Isaura as

creations of a heightened realist imagination – and precursors of the Latin American magical realist tradition, which Honwana's Mozambican successor Mia Couto went on to explore after independence.

Last year I began an online search for the AWS translation of *Mangy-Dog*. Bezos's outlets had the only offers I could find, AbeBooks with a used copy at £53.21 and Amazon with another at £135.75; I resisted both. My quixotic trawl through Portuguese websites turned up a cheap first edition in the original with the bonus – like a rare cancellation on a postage stamp – of a seal on the opening pages announcing that it was the property of the PIDE, the Estado Novo's secret police. Publication, outrage, confiscation – this was a trophy copy that told the political history of the book, but when I was referred to the seller's website there was no trace of it. Instead, I bought a digitised version from the Biblioteca Nacional de Portugal and saw Bertina's illustrations for the first time.²

Bertina, like Honwana, was a modernist, reimagining European idioms for a Mozambican context. Her pieces for Honwana's book are done in Indian ink on paper. They evoke semi-human figures – part child, part premature adult – emaciated and exhausted: a pelvis, a ribcage, several pairs of arms and splayed fingers sprouting like shoots from importunate hands offer blurred glimpses of the colonised, stripped down to essentials and incapable of repose, like restless objects of inquiry who have shifted position while they were sitting for a colonial daguerreotype. In the illustration that prefaces 'Dina', three creatures appear with human faces: two are joined in uneasy gestures of greeting while another seems to look on, like the labourer whose daughter vanishes into the maize with the farm manager.

Yet it's wrong to imagine the illustrations riffing on the stories. In the blurb on the back of the first edition, Honwana tells us that Bertina hadn't read them before her work was selected for the book. Then there's a maverick illustration: a photograph of the palm of a hand, which accompanies 'The Hands of the Blacks'. This, Honwana explains, is an image of his own hand. It looks as if it was made on a photocopier; it is proudly self-incriminating, like an entry in a police file on an unrepentant militant: *Honwana fecit*.



Preface to 'Dina', date unknown.



Honwana's Hand.

Born in Mozambique in 1924, Bertina was the daughter of prosperous parents in a mixed-race partnership. In the 1930s the family sent her to

school in Lisbon, where she went on to study decorative arts, and later fine art, returning to Mozambique in 1953. She had her first solo show in Lourenço Marques at the end of the 1950s. Like most educated Mozambicans she was fiercely opposed to Portuguese rule. She was a keen reader of the Mozambican poets Noémia de Sousa and José Craveirinha. Her first husband, Virgílio de Lemos, was himself a poet – and an anti-colonial agitator. He wound up in prison, and Bertina, who was now in the sights of the police, left for Europe in the early 1960s.⁸

She settled in Rome and went on to establish her reputation as a Mozambican-Italian artist. She brought with her a living African tradition that had little to do with the dusty troves of masks and ceremonial objects kept by dealers and gallery owners in Europe. In the world of publishing – *Présence Africaine* in Paris and later AWS in London – African writers were making impressive headway, but for visual artists progress was fitful. Long after the ‘Africana’ vogue associated with Cubism and Surrealism, many dealers in African art were still advertising an array of generic products from a continent fossilised in amber. Contemporary African artists who responded to European modernism found it hard to enter the lists as named artists in markets where buyers were interested in the acquisition of artefacts whose makers were of no great consequence. In Italy Bertina worked on semi-abstract pieces that carried the modernist tradition away from Europe and North America towards symbolic African decoration and totemic imagery (there are several extant oil paintings in a projected series of totems). Unlike Honwana, she could imagine a continent where Europeans had never set foot, and her distillations of Africanness are more intense, perhaps, for the fact that they were made in exile.⁹

Even so, her anti-colonialism was better served by figuration. *Boat Song* (1963) records the detention of Craveirinha, a member of a Frelimo cell at the time: the poet’s wrists are bound and his arms rise into the upper half of the painting, while colonial soldiers look on. We find them in many of Bertina’s works, mostly in profile – mouths open, teeth visible, faces frozen in a rictus of pallid intention. *Fanisse Was My Grandmother* (1967) stages a drama in the village of Michafutene, not far from Maputo. Fanisse is wearing a decorative headscarf. She has snatched up her belongings – a collage element of woven fabric – as she flees from the same identikit soldiers. The space between pursuers and pursued is compressed, like the space in a carved frieze of a scene from the Gospels. The painting takes its

name from 'Elegy to my Grandmother Fanisse', a poem by Craveirinha, whose closing stanzas ascribe her death to despair, or exhaustion. In the poem, the regime has decided to build a road through her family's land and she has lost her will to live: 'nobody was killing ... but that's how it was / that my grandma Fanisse / died.'^{[10](#)}



Bertina Lopes, *Boat Song* (detail), 1963.

In the painting, the warm, laterite tones of the earth are transposed to the sky. The roofs of the rondavels behind the protagonist are done in purple and indigo, and ribbed with pale orange, evoking the slatted light that penetrates the thatch, as if the Portuguese had turned the dwellings – and the lives – of Mozambicans inside out. Honwana, too, has a distinctive palette. His stark pieces in black and white – ‘Mangy-Dog’, ‘The Hands of the Blacks’ – assert the primacy of race precisely in order to map it onto a class system; black and white, after all, are not true colours. Elsewhere his tones, often like Bertina’s, are muddy or subdued. In ‘Dina’, the plantation overseer hopes to appease the father of the young woman he’s led into the fields with a bottle of ‘dirty reddish yellow’ wine. In another of Honwana’s stories, ‘Nhinguitimo’, the ‘accusatory’ cooing of pigeons makes ‘the intense green of the fields’ seem ‘inappropriate, and the vast blue of the sky insipid’, as if the narrator mistrusts colour in the first place.



Bertina Lopes, *Fanisse Was My Grandmother*, 1967.

Bertina admired Picasso. To her mind, the Spanish Republican cause foreshadowed the independence struggles in the Portuguese colonies and the persistence of Iberian fascism – Franco’s dictatorship in Madrid and the Estado Novo in Lisbon. In *Big Cry* (1970), a stylistic allusion to *Guernica*, birds perch on the outspread arms of a grieving woman. To one side of her, a warrior wields a spear; to the other, a male figure raises his hands in supplication. At the edge of the painting, a snake coiled around the trunk of a lopped tree seems, like the rod of Asclepius, to hold the promise of healing.

In her *Homage to Amílcar Cabral*, painted in 1973 (the year he was assassinated), the leader of the liberation movement in Portuguese Guinea

and Cape Verde has become a venerable ancestor presiding over his successors: the independence struggle is henceforth a process of transmission from the fallen to the living. *In Memory of Picasso* (1974), Bertina's colourised revision of *Guernica*, is transposed to the anti-colonial struggle. Two women wearing mantillas could almost be the same figure, who appears once as a lone fugitive and again to her left as a mourner with the livid body of Picasso in her arms. Tears run from the eyes of grieving bushbuck, as they do from the rheumy eyes of Mangy-Dog in his final moments. At the right of the canvas, soldiers are closing in. Elsewhere in Bertina's figurative pieces, the story of persecution gives way to confident depictions of pre-colonial (or non-colonial) Africa, in which spirit mediums reclaim their ritual empowerment as supernatural acrobats, legendary ancestors and animal totems in the guise of leopards.



Bertina Lopes, *In Memory of Picasso*, 1974.

Before they left Mozambique, Bertina and Honwana belonged to a close circle of writers and artists in Lourenço Marques, including Craveirinha and the painter Malangatana Ngwenya – another activist jailed around the same time as Honwana. Malangatana is Bertina's closest cousin in the genealogy of Mozambican visual arts. During her steady ascent to recognition, Malangatana – twelve years younger – began to produce epic murals depicting life in Mozambique (attrition, war, hunger), which rapidly earned him a reputation beyond southern Africa. The mentor of this family of artists and intellectuals was the Portuguese architect Pancho Guedes (1925–

2015), who offered his garage to Malangatana as a studio, along with a stipend, and opened up his home in the capital as a salon. His British wife Dorothy translated *Mangy-Dog* for AWS, and despite the anachronism of its 1960s English slang, her translation holds up well. It was Guedes who saw Honwana's collection of stories into print; he took charge of the design and almost certainly decided on Bertina's work for the illustrations, bringing together two anti-colonial perspectives – one a writer's, the other an artist's – as the independence struggle got underway.

Guedes's career took off in Lourenço Marques as the Estado Novo's postwar building boom in the colonies was in full swing. Lisbon was getting over its infatuation with fascist styles of modernism and there was still leeway for a young modernist convinced that racism would wither away under the shadow of his grand buildings, several of which survive in Mozambique as tourist attractions. In an essay published in 2003, Honwana remembers slipping 'surreptitiously through the service door' as a young man to attend Guedes's salons before the two men struck up a friendship.¹¹ Honwana praises Guedes's buildings in Maputo as gigantic 'sculptures' and admires him, above all, for his patronage of Malangatana. By the time of Malangatana's fame, Bertina had established a solid reputation in Italy and Honwana was rising through the ranks of Frelimo. More interested in his professional future than he was in anti-apartheid politics, Guedes left at independence and took a chair in architecture at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg.

Like the FLN after Algerian independence in 1962, Frelimo promptly extended its hospitality to other armed liberation movements and threw in its lot with the ANC and the Zimbabwean struggle against white minority rule in southern Africa. Mozambique had a common border with South Africa and another with Rhodesia, which gave Pretoria and Ian Smith's white-minority regime ample opportunity to destabilise the new government in Maputo. After its own independence in 1980, Zimbabwe became one of Mozambique's most dependable allies, but South Africa kept up the pressure for the better part of ten years, punishing both countries for hosting antiapartheid exiles. Some, like Ruth First (killed by a South African letter bomb in 1982) and Albie Sachs (maimed by a South African car bomb in 1988), were senior figures in the liberation movement. Pretoria had a 'total strategy' devised to weaken its dissident neighbours. In Mozambique, that involved disrupting food supplies and playing on

widespread grievances among the rural population, whom Frelimo, in the first flush of its Marxist–Leninist enthusiasm, had forced into collectivised farms. Many displaced smallholders were ready to down tools and sign up to Renamo (Resistência Nacional Moçambicana), a counterrevolutionary jacquerie armed and trained by South Africa.

By the mid-1980s, Frelimo was faced with critical food shortages, ongoing famine and an undefeatable insurgency. The colonial infrastructure, such as it was, fell quickly into disrepair; the new army was no match for the rebels, despite the presence of advisers from the Soviet bloc. Increasingly the country was dependent on an auxiliary force of foreign NGOs and UN agencies that promised to hold the pass until the Cold War came to an end – and apartheid with it. A million Mozambicans died between the late 1970s and early 1990s, as South Africa took the fight to a regime that made drastic mistakes of its own.

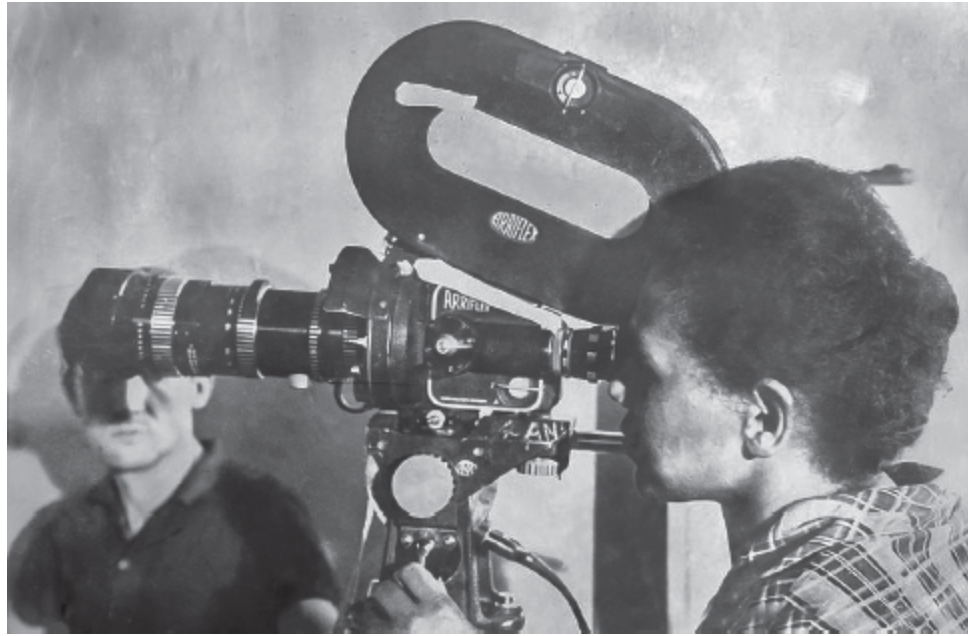
This was the situation that thrust Malangatana to prominence as the recorder of Mozambique’s tribulations in vast panels and spectacular public murals. By the late 1980s, no painter treating the misery that apartheid South Africa visited on the rest of the region had a wider international public. At independence Malangatana and Bertina (looking on from Europe) had hoped to move away from the oppressive themes of the colonial period – suffering and resistance – but the new war cast a shadow over their aspirations. Honwana and his brother Fernando were aides to Mozambique’s president Samora Machel, and Luís Bernardo went on to become minister for culture. In 1987, the year after Machel died in a suspicious plane crash in South Africa, Honwana joined UNESCO. He held on to his ministerial role in Maputo until the early 1990s, when South Africa’s total strategy was wound up and a peace deal was struck between Frelimo and Renamo in Rome, where Bertina is said to have been a key intermediary. By then Mangy-Dog, with his lachrymose eyes, was long dead, and so perhaps was Honwana’s urge to write fiction, although a straggler appeared in *The Picador Book of African Stories*. In 2017 he published a set of essays, *A Vêha Casa de Madeira e Zinco*, ‘The Old House of Wood and Zinc’, which has yet to be translated into English.¹² One painting alone is unlikely to establish an artist’s reputation, and Bertina made many. But a memorable work of fiction is enough to seal a writer’s.

5

‘Women Who Struggle’: Sarah Maldoror

A young woman waits in a bare room for a meeting with her lover, who has been detained as an anti-colonial agitator. He is escorted by a Portuguese plainclothes officer. This is Angola, sometime in the early 1960s. The couple embrace; he asks her for news of their children. The woman’s promise to bring the prisoner a gift on her next visit to the cells is overheard by the security man. Back in the detention centre, he reports to his superior; their discussion seals the prisoner’s fate. *Monangambeee* (1969) was Sarah Maldoror’s first film, based on a short story by the Angolan novelist José Luandino Vieira.¹ The characters speak in French. Like the story, the film turns on a misunderstanding about what has been said between the couple in the room. The security agents take the word ‘complet’ – *fato completo* in Portuguese – to mean a suit, which suggests that the detainee has hopes of appearing before a tribunal, respectably dressed, to plead his case. The prisoner is isolated, beaten and starved. On the point of dying, he receives the gift he was promised – a pot of fish, bean and plantain stew, known affectionately by Angolans as a *fato completo*.

At roughly fifteen minutes, *Monangambeee* is a miniature of the anti-colonial struggle in Portugal’s African colonies. The misunderstanding of the colloquialism, which stands broadly for the coloniser’s ignorance of the lives and idioms of the colonised, will take the struggle to a claustrophobic pitch in the detention centre. The script, which includes a short monologue about hunger delivered by the prisoner to a lizard in his cell, is spare. Two scenes are carefully choreographed: in the opening moments of the film the reunited couple have the finesse and economy of dancers; towards the end, the pain of the prisoner under torture is performed as a mime, without a torturer, and scored – like the rest of the film – by the Art Ensemble of Chicago.



Maldoror on the set of *Monangambee*.

Much of Maldoror's approach over her long career is set out in *Monangambee*. 'I am Black,' she told Marguerite Duras in 1958; 'I need to think of myself as Black.'² She was also a committed anti-colonialist: 'monangambee' is an elongation of the Kimbundu word for a contract labourer; it was one of the rallying cries of the Angolan liberation movement. Maldoror honoured independence struggles in Africa and other parts of the world throughout her life. But she refused to set aside her values as a filmmaker in the name of a cause: ways of seeing had to be learned and owned, or there was no seeing at all. Before she came into her own with *Monangambee*, she had worked on *The Battle of Algiers* (1966) with Gillo Pontecorvo. One of her tasks was to head to the poorer neighbourhoods of the capital, win the trust of Algerian women who had never appeared on film and persuade them to take part. Yet her sense of how to handle a harrowing scene in detention is quite unlike Pontecorvo's neo-realist treatment, however much she admired his masterpiece. 'I have no time to make didactic political films,' she said after the release of *Sambizanga* (1972), her full-length feature set during the anticolonial struggle in Angola.³

Maldoror went on to make a further forty films: dramas, documentaries for French TV and dozens of shorts. Some were notes and drafts in

cinematic form, no longer than ten minutes. Others were commissioned for television. She presented many poets, intellectuals and artists to the public as figures in their own right or adapted their works for the screen, including Aimé Césaire and two fellow Caribbean poets, René Depestre and Léon Damas; the French poet Louis Aragon; the French photographer Robert Doisneau; the Russian-Mexican painter Vladimir Rusakov and his father, Victor Serge, the hero of the anti-Stalinist left. Many of Maldoror's works are lost. Among her missing pieces are a four-minute short on the Cuban artist Wifredo Lam; *Louise Michel, the Commune and Us*, a film broadcast in the early 1970s; and *Guns for Banta*, a feature she shot in 1970 in Guinea-Bissau during the liberation struggle against the Portuguese.

Maldoror moved away from her successes as briskly as she did from projects that never came good. She was generous with her own material. In Chris Marker's famous peripatetic essay *Sans Soleil* (1983), a brief interlude of documentary footage showing anti-colonial guerrillas in Guinea-Bissau was shot by Maldoror; she gifted it to Marker with no strings attached. She was collegiate to a fault provided your project made sense to her. Her own consuming interest during the 1960s and 1970s was the second wave of African liberation, above all in Guinea-Bissau and Angola.

Because she raised most of her funding in Europe, Paris was Maldoror's obvious base. She was fascinated by its intellectual tribes and its *mixité*. She was also a lover of poetry and jazz: she heard both as summons to liberation, which required risk-taking, experimentation and the courage to fail. In the early 1970s she set up camp in Saint-Denis at the margin of the capital and the *banlieues*, at ease in a *département* that had been run by the French Communist Party since the Liberation in 1944. She had many ideas for documentaries about the neighbourhood, but few made it to completion. A short film on the Basilica of Saint-Denis, which she could see at the end of the street whenever she left her apartment, has survived. The centrepiece of *Abbaye Royale de Saint-Denis* (c. 1977) is a study of the royal necropolis, where the remains of kings and queens of France are entombed beneath effigies and elaborate pavilions. With its placid close-ups and simple pans, Maldoror's exploration of mortuary splendour resembles a set of drawings in a sketchbook. They speak to her powers of concentration rather than her politics, even though we know she was a republican and a revolutionary. (We know too that many of the tombs were desecrated by

revolutionaries in 1793.) The camera lingers on a thirteenth-century bas relief of demons taunting the soul of King Dagobert: a drama whose protagonist she dignifies, like the prisoner under duress in *Monangambee*. In voiceover, we hear the words of Abbé Suger of Saint-Denis and funeral orations by Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet; the score consists of plainsong and passages from François Couperin (*Leçons de ténèbres*). Maldoror never thought of beauty as a distraction, even in her films that deal directly with life-and-death politics.

Marguerite Sarah Ducados was born in 1929 in the Gers, in south-west France, where her mother worked as a maid. Her father was a Black Frenchman from Guadeloupe, who died when she was young. She was one of four children in a single-parent family; she spent time in an orphanage. By the 1950s, she was in Paris, where she found work as a PE instructor and enrolled at the school of dramatic arts in the rue Blanche, where she and a group of fellow students, all of them Black, put together a small theatre company. Les Griots described themselves as an African performing arts company. They staged readings from Césaire and had their first success with a production of *Huis Clos*. Skin colour was no obstacle to casting Sartre's piece or their subsequent productions (among them Pushkin's *The Stone Guest* and Synge's *In the Shadow of the Glen*): to identify as Black was a badge of defiance, both culturally and politically, as the call for African independence reached Paris and France's undeclared war in Algeria intensified.⁴

Ducados took her pseudonym from *Les Chants de Maldoror*, a transgressive prose piece in six cantos composed in the 1860s by the Comte de Lautréamont, 'rediscovered' by the Surrealists between the wars. 'Lautréamont', too, was a pseudonym, adopted by the French-Uruguayan Isidore Ducasse (1846–1870): it was an uncomplicated step from Ducados via Ducasse to Maldoror, with a nudge from the writings of Césaire, for whom Lautréamont was a revolutionary inspiration.⁵ Maldoror had a growing number of influential admirers in Paris, among them the publisher François Maspero, whom she met at his bookshop La Joie de Lire when she asked if she could put up a poster for a show; they forged a lasting friendship.

The exiled Angolan anti-colonial activist and poet Mário Pinto de Andrade became her partner for life. Like many intellectuals from Portugal's colonies who went to study in Lisbon, Andrade had fallen foul of the regime's security forces in the early 1950s (we glimpse them at work in *Monangambeee*). In Paris he was offered an editorial post at *Présence Africaine*, a journal whose star was in the ascendant. The first issue had appeared in 1947; its energetic young editor, Alioune Diop (another of Maldoror's contacts), started a book-publishing imprint shortly afterwards.⁶ Andrade and Diop drew a community of Black intellectuals, including African Americans like Langston Hughes and Richard Wright, to the offices of *Présence Africaine*. Andrade was working with Césaire on a new edition of his long poem *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* and compiling an anthology of Lusophone African poetry.⁷ In 1956 Diop organised the first Congress of Black Writers and Artists at the Sorbonne, where Maldoror is said to have met Andrade and begun her lifelong alliance with Césaire.

Les Nègres, Jean Genet's subversive masque – or 'clownerie', as he called it – was published in 1958. In it, a racialised murder is re-enacted by Black culprits as a performance within a performance, which pits a panel of decadent white dignitaries (played by Black actors) against the accused (also played by Black actors). Intrigued by the piece, Maldoror convinced Genet to let Les Griots stage it and enlisted Roger Blin to direct. The production was guaranteed to draw attention: Genet was already notorious for his lyrical novels about crime, prisons and homosexual love; Blin was a familiar face on French cinema screens and a theatre director with the first production of *En attendant Godot* (1953) to his credit. That Genet should give the first performance rights for the play to an outspoken young Black woman was both titillating and scandalous. Maldoror's spiky interview with Marguerite Duras in *France Observateur* was published shortly after the news got about.

Duras: Why do you want to perform *Les Nègres* in front of white people and not in front of Blacks?

Maldoror: Because we don't know one another ... because we are not on an equal footing with whites ... we have only one way to overcome our past, as determined by you. And that is to play on this past: to make fun of the Blacks as they're seen by whites.

Duras: For your amusement and that of whites?

Maldoror: No. For our amusement and your education.

Duras: Our education matters to you?

Maldoror: Absolutely ... We will never be free for as long as you see us the way you see us. For us to become free Blacks, we have to rid you of the idea you have of us. We need you ... to forget what you were taught at school about Blacks. Because here you are, interviewing me and thinking you know about the problem for Blacks, but you don't know!⁸

The play opened at the Théâtre de Lutèce in October 1959. *Le Monde* called it one of the most exciting pieces of the season.⁹ But Maldoror, who had done so much to bring it about (and probably rehearsed for the role of the queen), was no longer involved. She had made common cause with Andrade: Africa was the new theatre of struggle, and she threw herself into it. A few years later, *Les Griots* was reinvented with the help of Med Hondo, the Mauritanian-French film director who sealed his cinematic reputation with *Soleil Ô* (1970). A little younger than Maldoror – trained, like her, in drama school and raised on Chekhov and Molière – he was her obvious successor.

By the end of 1959 Andrade and Maldoror were in Guinea-Conakry, at the invitation of the new head of state, Ahmed Sekou Touré, a radical who had led the country to full independence from France in 1958 and opened up Conakry as a talking shop for African liberation movements. Andrade was one of the founders of the *Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola*. In 1960, Agostinho Neto, a senior MPLA colleague – and another poet – was jailed by the Portuguese. Andrade was appointed head of the MPLA and given an office in Conakry.

Maldoror had long been intrigued by the messy entanglement between the Surrealists and the French Communist Party: she was a keen reader of Surrealist verse – and later a friend of Louis Aragon – as well as a staunch supporter of the party (and perhaps a member). In Conakry she was awarded a bursary to study at the Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography in Moscow, where she met Ousmane Sembène, a central figure in modernist African cinema. Her first child, Annouchka, was born in Moscow in 1962.

Mother and daughter left the Soviet Union the following year. 'I'm not sure where we went,' Annouchka told me when we met in Paris. Perhaps

they returned to Guinea-Conakry. If so, it would have been a brief stay before a move to Morocco, where Maldoror spent a year or more and where Annouchka's sister, Henda, was born. For much of this time Andrade was with the family. Morocco, like Guinea-Conakry, was a haven for anti-colonial activists, although the young King Hassan II would soon put paid to this arrangement.¹⁰ Andrade and Nelson Mandela were among the last anti-colonialists to receive military training from a detachment of Algerian Front de libération nationale (FLN) fighters posted across the border on Moroccan soil. A few months after Mandela's visit, the French withdrew from Algeria and Hassan began his crackdown on subversive guests. In 1964, as Andrade plied the African liberation networks, Maldoror and the children joined him in Algiers, the new anti-imperialist metropole of the Third World. By then Agostinho Neto had escaped from prison in Lisbon to assume the leadership of the MPLA and Andrade had bowed out gracefully. As Andrade took stock of his situation, Maldoror was scouting for commissions.

Algiers was humming with revolutionary resolve. Maldoror arrived as cinema in Algeria was about to lift off. *Elles*, a short documentary by Ahmed Lalleem released in 1966, took its cue from *Chronique d'un été*, inviting Algerian girls, most of them teenagers, to speak to camera about their hopes for the future as women in a socially conservative country.¹¹ Lalleem brought Maldoror on board as assistant director. *Elles* and *The Battle of Algiers* marked the beginning of her career in film (her payslips from the Pontecorvo shoot became family souvenirs). In both cases she was an intermediary between male directors and the women they wanted to film. In 1968 she began working on *Monangambee*.

Pan-Africanism had faltered as a political programme, but it was about to be reinvented as a spectacular cultural project, hosted by the regime in Algeria. The legendary Pan-African Festival in 1969 – recorded in the documentary by William Klein, with Maldoror working in the second camera crew – drew hundreds of artists and performers to the city, among them Nina Simone, Miriam Makeba, Manu Dibango and the jazz saxophonist Archie Shepp.¹² Maldoror and Shepp became friends, and in 2003 he appeared in one of her films. The African Cinema Week was one of the festival's attractions (Sembène was in attendance), and movies seemed to be on everyone's minds, including members of Algeria's ruling party.

Pontecorvo had pioneered a path for Costa-Gavras, who went to Algeria to shoot many of the scenes in *Z* (1969), his thriller about the turmoil in Greece, where a military junta had recently seized power. The FLN agreed a co-production deal. It had also put up money for Klein's documentary and for *Monangambee*, which was approved for release a few months after the festival. 'Having screened the film,' the official report read, 'the Department of Orientation and Information can find no impediment, on political grounds, to its distribution.'¹³ This was high praise from a regime that was already on the alert for ideological error.

Maldoror and Andrade savoured the postwar mood in Algiers and entertained many visitors and expat revolutionaries at their home in Saint-Eugène, a few miles along the coast from the city. Annouchka remembers a flurry of delegates from Cuba, among them Che Guevara. Amílcar Cabral, the leader of the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (PAIGC), was a regular guest and Andrade's closest friend – they had met in Lisbon in 1948. All the guest liberation movements, including the Black Panthers, were entitled to military training in Algeria, but their members generally turned up unarmed in Saint-Eugène, although Annouchka recalls that more than once her mother had to remind Eldridge Cleaver to leave his guns by the door.

Weapons – or rather, armed struggle – would be the subject of Maldoror's first feature-length film. The FLN's military wing, by now firmly in charge of Algeria, was willing to fund her project, which she shot in Guinea-Bissau, where anti-colonial guerrillas were making headway against the Portuguese. With Cabral's assistance, Maldoror was received by the fighters in the bush and found a way to dramatise her documentary footage, devising characters based on militants and villagers she met. She returned to Algiers in 1970 or early 1971 with enough footage for a feature. Its title, *Guns for Banta*, referred to a village in guerrilla-held territory.

'I was thrown out of Algeria,' Maldoror said in an interview on Radio France Internationale in 2019, the year before she died. 'But I wasn't the only one. And so what?'¹⁴ Her Algerian funders weren't happy with her cut. Awa, her central character, was a woman; this was inappropriate, the FLN felt, even though many Algerian women had risked their lives in the fight against France. And she had opted for a jazz soundtrack, which went against the grain of the FLN's nationalist renaissance. She was furious with the army staffer who gave her the news. It was her film, she told him, not

his; as far as she was concerned, he was a fuck-all subaltern, a ‘capitaine de merde’. He was a senior officer, he corrected her, and would have killed her if she hadn’t been a guest of the FLN. She was given two days to leave the country.

Cabral was in Algiers when the row erupted and, according to Annouchka, he and Andrade escorted Maldoror to the airport, fearful for her safety; at the terminal in Paris, where she might still be in danger, she was met by members of the PAIGC. Before long, with help from Marker and Madeleine Alleins – the lawyer of the deposed Algerian president Ahmed Ben Bella – she set up home in Saint-Denis where the children joined her. At the insistence of the Portuguese government, Andrade was on an Interpol list of subversives, but he had several passports issued by newly independent African states in different names, and managed to visit the family from time to time, flying to Brussels and travelling by road to Paris. The independence of the Portuguese colonies had become the focus of Maldoror’s life as well as his. Andrade was now president of a coordinating body for the four anti-Portuguese movements in Africa. But national priorities were already more urgent: he was close to Cabral and impressed by the success of the movement in Guinea-Bissau, but alarmed by events in Angola, where the MPLA was threatened by rival movements and plagued by internal dissent.

Maldoror’s next film was a drama about Angola, set not in the turmoil of the present but in 1960 as the anti-colonial movement prepared to take up arms. *Sambizanga* is in many ways the precocious sibling of *Monangambeee*, which was shot on 16 mm black-and-white film and based on a short story. *Sambizanga* was shot on 35 mm stock, in colour – running time ninety-eight minutes – and based on a novella, again by Luandino Vieira.¹⁵ In both films, the arrest of an activist sets off a series of events that ends with a death in detention. But in *Sambizanga* the partner of the detainee (played by Elisa Andrade in both films) is the central character: Maria isn’t a fighter – this isn’t *Guns for Banta* – so much as a lowly Penelope who abandons her loom and sets out in search of her missing nobody, Domingos Xavier, a tractor driver in a stone quarry and a member of an anti-colonialist cell. The police have seized Domingos in the quarry workers’ compound near Dondo, an inland provincial city, but when Maria learns that he has been transferred to Luanda, she sets off with their infant on her back. Her final destination is the sprawling *musseque* of Sambizanga

on the edge of the city. She goes from one police station to another for news and finally locates Domingos in a centre for political prisoners, but not in time to see him alive.



Anti-colonial militants prepare to spread the word in *Sambizanga*.

The spine of the film is a road movie. Maria's journey to Luanda is among the most memorable sequences in Maldoror's work. Benign, semi-mountainous landscapes of woodland and misted valleys, which Maria observes from the window of a bus, evoke a prelapsarian past, or perhaps a future beyond violence – in any case a world without colonial rule. She trudges for what might be hours on tracks surrounded by lush vegetation. Yet for much of the time our attention is on the inclination of her head, her gaze shifting from the window or the edge of the road to her own thoughts, as the reaction shot becomes the main event. Conjuring an inner world that takes the measure of real contradictions for millions of Angolans – between their disempowerment and their obstinate wish for something better – is a tall order. Success or failure hangs on the least inflection of Maria's eyes.



Elisa Andrade as Maria in *Sambizanga*.

Maldoror liked to set herself problems. How do you film an interrogation? What attitude on the part of your actors most accurately depicts grief in a world where people are called on to die for a cause? Is it possible to shoot a drama about politics and avoid laying it on thick? In a short scene set in the provinces we're introduced to Mussunda, an anti-colonialist tailor, as he chalks up a length of fabric (an echo of the *fato completo* in *Monangambeee*). He is lecturing his apprentices about the struggle: it's not a conflict between Blacks, whites and mulattos, he argues, so much as a class war between rich and poor. When a junior tailor protests that the rich provide work for the poor, Mussunda disagrees. Maldoror's challenge, we sense, is to ensure that the monologue that follows – in which Mussunda's position is close to her own – doesn't seem glib or doctrinaire. In a view along the length of the shop we see the cutting tables and sewing machines; at the far end, net curtains billow at a window; to the right a bright plastic fly-curtain shifts in the same breeze. We feel the circulation of free discourse, like the air in the room, while the whirr of the sewing machines grounds the argument in the domain of work – an argument that could land these skilled labourers in detention.

How to handle Domingos's death was another challenge, which she solved by cutting from the interrogation to a pair of guards dumping his near-lifeless body in an overcrowded cell. The prisoners dab tentatively at his face as he dies. They adjust his arms by his side and sing a low, ragged lament. This typically understated approach gives Maldoror space to let Maria/Andrade off the leash in extravagant performances of rage and despair, before the film returns to its matter-of-fact tone. Maldoror's only concession to grandiloquence is to have Domingos's death announced at an open-air dance attended by militants. The old Domingos is dead, a senior figure in the movement tells the guests, but his 'real life' – as in the title of Luandino Vieira's novel – has just begun. He is now immortal, a martyr for the cause; no tears should be shed; the band must play on. The country is on the verge of an uprising that will mark the start of its armed struggle against the Portuguese.

Maldoror filmed *Sambizanga* in independent, Francophone Congo-Brazzaville: shooting in Angola in the early 1970s was out of the question. The landscapes are plausibly Angolan; the colonial lingua franca, which accounts for most of the dialogue, is Portuguese, not French. At the time, many independence activists from Portugal's colonies were in Brazzaville, including Elisa Andrade and Domingos de Oliveira, an MPLA member, who plays Domingos; small parts were also taken by Angolans, none with previous acting experience. *Sambizanga* picked up a prize at the Carthage Film Festival in 1972, and in 1974, following the overthrow of the Estado Novo regime in Lisbon, it was watched by sizeable audiences in Portugal.

It wasn't to everyone's taste. Why wasn't the anti-colonialist message hammered home? Where were the helicopters raking the forest with bullets and the intrepid liberation fighters returning fire? Why was the film so technically accomplished: wasn't this the wrong aesthetic for a rousing tribute to the struggle? In the tenor of these criticisms Maldoror may have heard an echo of her 'capitaine de merde'. She responded in an interview for the journal *Women & Film* in 1974.¹⁶ Her film was set in 1960, she explained, and the helicopters only arrived later, after the Portuguese became alarmed by the rise of a new 'consciousness' among Angolans. And besides, she had no interest in 'political rhetoric'. On the question of quality: 'Technology belongs to everyone. "A talented Black": you can relegate that concept to my French past.' She went further: 'The colour of a person's skin is of no interest to me ... I'm not a subscriber to the concept

of the Third World. I make films so that people – no matter what race or colour – can understand them.’ This was elementary Marxist internationalism in its 1970s iteration, even if her position was more nuanced than she was willing to admit. When the same criticisms resurfaced in the 1990s, there was an additional reproach: her actors were too good-looking. ‘The main actors, the man and the woman are beautiful,’ she agreed. ‘And so? There are beautiful Black people [*des beaux nègres*]. What do you want to hear? If I get to choose between beautiful and less beautiful actors, I choose the beautiful ones.’¹⁷

Sambizanga took Maldoror on tour, mapping out new ideas as she attended screenings. Andrade remained an itinerant diplomat for African liberation. She often called on him for help. She had long been a voracious reader, pillaging copies of new titles from Maspero, Présence Africaine and Editions du Seuil as they came off the presses, but she was a reluctant writer and drew the line at drafting scripts. An imperious letter to Andrade, sent while *Sambizanga* was in pre-production, explains that she can’t get started unless he lends a hand with the writing. His name duly appears in the credits.

The couple were in intermittent contact over the next few years. In 1973 Cabral was murdered while visiting Guinea-Conakry. Maldoror made an unauthorised trip to Guinea-Bissau, crossing on foot from Senegal to join the PAIGC maquisards and shoot material for a documentary which was never finished. She and her cinematographer were hosted by PAIGC fighters, including Luís Cabral, who had replaced his half-brother as leader of the party: this was the footage that came to light many years later in Marker’s *Sans Soleil*. In April 1974, the coup in Lisbon did away with the Portuguese regimes in Africa: Guinea-Bissau was granted formal independence six months later. For Angola, it came the following year. Andrade – who didn’t see eye to eye with Neto – had already distanced himself from the MPLA. He was invited to Guinea-Bissau by the PAIGC government and ran its Ministry of Culture for several years. At Maldoror’s suggestion, he invited Marker to train the country’s novice filmmakers.

Sambizanga had rewarded Maldoror with work. A number of films followed, among them a documentary with Césaire in Martinique; *Un Dessert pour Constance*, a sharp comedy about two Senegalese street cleaners in Paris; and a dozen short items, mostly for a French TV magazine slot. This prodigious output enabled her to support Andrade, who

asked no favours from the PAIGC, and to raise their children, despite periodic crises. 'I'm unemployed,' she wrote to a government minister in Guinea-Bissau in 1982, urging him to track down the master of *Guns for Banta* in Algiers. 'I've got problems.'¹⁸ But within months she had won a commission from French TV for a drama based on a story by Victor Serge.

L'Hôpital de Leningrad (1982) is one of Maldoror's great achievements. Like Serge's piece, her film is set in a rundown psychiatric hospital, whose deputy director welcomes Victor Lvovich – that's to say Serge, played by Rüdiger Vogler – and shows him round. Serge's wife is suffering from a mental disorder: he is checking out the hospital, which doubles as a facility for counter-revolutionaries and other offenders. We know from the date on a manuscript in one scene that we're in the early 1930s. We can also guess from the buildings, the barred windows, the new arrivals being bundled out of a truck in the yard by soldiers, that the overarching mood in Stalinist Russia is fear. Serge's piece asks whether there is any escape, and if so, at what price? A new confinement in a world of delusion possibly? And a return to the prison system that the fugitive has ceased to be afraid of? Maldoror sticks closely to Serge's questions.

Touring the hospital, he encounters a young woman who served two stints in Siberia, ran away and was recaptured, and a new detainee, who has just been arrested with her fellow workers in a shoe factory: she asks Serge to remember her name and address. In a well-appointed cell, the doctor introduces him to Nestor Petrovich Yuriev, a 'lover of literature' (played by Blin). They are soon talking frankly. 'Are you afraid?' Nestor asks. 'Yes, sometimes, like everybody else.' 'If you're afraid, forgive me, you're an invalid who cultivates his illness ... Fear is an infectious neurosis ... I used to have it, but I'm better.' Nestor, it turns out, woke up one day to discover he was cured. He dashed off an 'appeal to the people' on forty identical handwritten fliers and posted them around Leningrad, adding his address at the bottom. 'Citizens, why are you trembling? Why are the members of our great Communist Party trembling? Why does the government uncover plots that don't exist? ... Look loyally at each other without fear and this nightmare will crumble.' The following morning he was waiting with a packed suitcase for OGPU agents to take him away.

Under duress, he speaks frankly about the 'infectious neurosis' to his interrogators and adds in quiet, messianic tones that they'll never forget what he's told them. Some are already at risk of recognising their own

symptoms. Serge's narrative ends at this point, but Maldoror adds a scene in which he returns home to his distraught wife, Liuba Rusakova (played by Anne Wiazemsky). Convinced that he's been followed by the secret police she confesses her 'fear': they'll both have to live with the possibility that she'll go mad. Serge reprimands her: 'Never use that word again.' You think at first he means 'mad'. He goes to his desk. Liuba picks up a book and reads aloud: 'I know the force of words / the alarm they sound ... so often unpublished, unprinted' – lines by Vladimir Mayakovsky that turned up after his suicide. Why won't Serge acknowledge that his writing is a suicidal mission? Without a party card, he's unpublishable, unprintable, fatally exposed as an oppositionist. She throws the volume of poems at him. In the closing scene, as he leaves the apartment building, agents are waiting for him, just as they were for Nestor. Maldoror's women know more than her men. Not that they always have the last word, as Liuba does, but we should imagine Maldoror's bereaved characters as active contributors to the cause, protracting it beyond the point of personal crisis. This is easier when we think of her characters in *Monangambee* and *Sambizanga* than when we encounter her dramatised version of Liuba, though the real Liuba outlived Serge by nearly forty years. 'I am only interested in women who struggle,' Maldoror said in her interview for *Women & Film*.

At the end of the 1980s, Maldoror took advantage of a visit to Atlanta to head for Mexico City and show her film about Serge to his son, Vladimir Rusakov. She had heard that Vlady, who had arrived in Mexico with his father in 1941, was a painter. A chamber in the oratory of San Felipe Neri had been converted into a library where he had been commissioned to paint a set of murals. Maldoror found this vast project irresistible. *Vlady, Peintre* (1989) is both an interview with Rusakov, then in his late sixties, and a visual record of his epic set of allegories, *Las Revoluciones y los elementos*. Her camera sweeps along the walls as he talks her through his idiosyncratic vista of revolutions, including Christianity, the English, American and French revolutions, the Bolshevik revolution, the revolutions in Latin America, even the psychoanalytic revolution.



Anne Wiazemsky as Liuba Rusakova (with Rüdiger Vogler as Victor Serge), in *L'Hôpital de Leningrad*.

The paintings teem with rising demons, plummeting angels and lost souls. Oliver Cromwell's head sprouts from the tail of a grotesque serpent; English despotism, in royalist mode, is parodied by a glimpse of two Englishmen – Ronnie and Reggie Kray – imprisoned in the Tower of London, as they were for a few days in the 1950s. The ascending demon of Bolshevism is depicted as a fiery archangel with winged feet, wielding axes that seem to grow from its hands. Bolshevism, Rusakov explains in voiceover, was part of 'our barbarity': 'The struggle for justice is as cruel as justice itself.' Fidel Castro appears astride an enormous dinosaur. Votive portraits peep through the fury: Fidel's young French protégé, Régis Debray; Óscar Romero, archbishop of San Salvador, murdered by a right-wing death squad in 1980. A panel depicts the death of Trotsky in 1940, his desk overturned in his study: Rusakov tells Maldoror he remembers his father crying after visiting Trotsky's house in Coyoacán. One tableau shows Serge's body, as his son glimpsed it, at the back of a police station in Mexico. Serge had died from a heart attack. The holes in the soles of his shoes are the stigmata of the exemplary, defeated revolutionary.

Maldoror's views by now were close to Serge's. She might not have agreed with Vlady that revolutionary politics seeded its own failure – a realist in practice, she remained an optimist by temperament – but *Revoluciones y los elementos*, which seemed to have spooled from Rusakov's imagination and become a sequence of majestic stills projected onto the library walls, was fearless and not entirely without hope. Cinema for Maldoror was as much a sister art to painting as painting was to poetry. On the eve of a production, she sometimes gathered her cinematographer and crew and sat them in front of a painting, to give them a sense of the way she would like the film to look.

When Andrade died in 1990, Maldoror was in her late sixties and went on to finish another eight films. In 1994 she made a documentary about Damas, a poet and co-founder of the Négritude movement, in his native French Guyana. She decided to shoot in black and white, and the French TV commissioners refused to broadcast it. It was the last of her serious run-ins with the networks. *Scala Milan AC* (2003) is a short comedy about a group of schoolchildren from a working-class area of Paris who win a trip to Milan. After the loss of Andrade, Maldoror was on her own with the screenplay. Like *Monangambee*, *Scala Milan AC* is based on a misunderstanding. Maldoror's group of teenagers in the twentieth *arrondissement* enter a competition for the best description of their neighbourhood. In Père Lachaise cemetery they come across Archie Shepp, riffing sweetly among the tombstones. When he lifts his mouth from his instrument to introduce himself – 'I'm Archie Shepp' – it's as though a grand mystery had been cleared up: a *Wizard of Oz* moment without the bathos. Shepp gives some sound advice to the children, who win the competition and set out for Italy in high hopes of a visit to the San Siro stadium, even a glimpse of AC Milan in action, only to discover that they're headed for La Scala. In the event, they're not disappointed. For Maldoror, high culture was a free-for-all in theory if not in fact. The FIFA anthem 'Nessun dorma' had opened up this possibility. The credits roll with special thanks to Agnès Varda, Maldoror's sponsor on this occasion.

In 2009, Maldoror finished a documentary tribute to Césaire, who had died the previous year.¹⁹ There were no more films before her own death in 2020, after she was diagnosed with COVID. Her career ends with an acknowledgement of Négritude and a homage to a founding member of the movement. But, like Césaire's, her view of politics took her well beyond an

essentialist celebration of Black identity. Césaire had already come to a revisionist view of Négritude as an occasion for Africa and the diaspora to live their own ‘history within history’ in the broader sense proposed by Marxism. Maldoror would have concurred. Millions of people, after all, were caught up in the liberation struggles of her day, from Indochina to Latin America. ‘From Négritude to Guerrilla War’, a typescript treatment for a series that she never made, begins with a schematic explanation of Négritude. Some, she writes, regard it as an Africanist ‘humanism for the 20th century’, others as a ‘dangerous mystification’. (Her schema hints at a closing film about Frantz Fanon, who took the latter view.)²⁰ One of those dangers, it seems, lay in dissociating African liberation from other causes. A few years earlier at the Carthage Film Festival, she had fought tooth and nail with her fellow jury members, insisting that a Palestinian film should be rewarded on principle, irrespective of its merits.

Yet Maldoror was reluctant to shrug off Négritude as the racialised framework in which her internationalist convictions had developed. Sartre had argued at the end of the 1940s that this was the way the movement should play out, but for Maldoror, like Césaire, Négritude was not an open-and-shut case. The literature remained eminently readable; its exponents had opened a key cultural front in the anti-colonial struggle and the dust had yet to settle. Perhaps, too, she had seen the tactical necessity of championing an essentialist-lite version of Blackness. If the imperial powers had invoked a Eurocentric universalism as a cover for their own ambitions in Africa, then Négritude – and pan-Africanism – were entitled to even up the score.

It may be too simple to say that Maldoror’s argument about race with Duras in 1959 and her remarks about the irrelevance of skin colour fifteen years later represent a shift in her beliefs. Surely it was possible to hold the two sets of thoughts in animated tension – to regard race as paramount at one moment and lose patience with it the next. Often it depended on the conversation she was having and the person in front of her. The same holds for her repudiation of Third Worldism. So many of her films dealt with Africa and the Caribbean that she was, for much of her life, a working *tiers-mondiste*, or at least a fellow-traveller. But there was no suggestion in her own mind that this should keep her away from other subjects (cathedrals, European poets and painters, the crimes of Stalinism), any more than her feminism would have disqualified her from making films about men.

In *Le Masque des mots* (1987), another of her films about Césaire, he remarks: ‘I appear to myself, when I’m writing a poem, as a person wearing a mask.’ Maldoror understood the value of masks from her days with Les Griots. Far from being banal deceptions, they are invitations to consider what is real and what isn’t, as Genet had proposed in *Les Nègres*. Often masks that fit disclose more than they conceal. Masks that slip, as they do with her novice actors in *Sambizanga*, allow us a glimpse of someone (or something) else – in this case colonial subjects, barely disguised as versions of themselves, enacting a constructive dismissal of colonialism. Masks, as she knew, have the power to reorder the realm of appearance – in carnival, ritual and above all in the political cinema at which she excelled.

Part III

A Pathway for the Colonised

6

The West African Photographer's Studio

One Pose, a Single Exposure: Seydou Keïta, Studio Photographer, Mali

In January 1939, an itinerant Angolan sent a postcard from the Belgian Congo to a friend back home. 'Salute my wife,' he wrote. 'Tell her that her old husband still has not lost the fire of his youth. He faces thundering rain and hunger, but he goes by canoe, carrying loads as if he were a boy of 18.' Antoine Freitas was approaching forty when he wrote the card; the 'loads' he mentions were the cumbersome bits and pieces of a journeyman photographer. He'd learned his craft from a missionary in Angola and built his own box camera. He was travelling from region to region – ethnic group to ethnic group – earning a living by taking photographs. The image on the other side of the postcard was of Freitas in Kasai Province (Congo), taking a portrait of five women, surrounded by a crowd of onlookers.¹ It's an action shot snapped by a colleague, and a rare glimpse of an African photographer going about his work a long way from home, before the heyday of African studio photography.

Freitas was not, as far as we know, a civil servant involved in a colonial recording venture. He was paid by families and communities who wanted their portraits taken. When he was making the rounds in the Congo, there were only a few people like him, and far many more like them. By the mid-1940s, as small studios began to proliferate in West African coastal cities, the customer was coming to the provider, and intrepid photographers no longer had to set off on long journeys to earn their keep. St Louis, the old French colonial capital at the mouth of the Senegal river, was a studio hub of sorts, first for wealthier Indigenous families and, as time went on, for people of modest means.

In the 1990s, as scholars pieced together a history of African photography, the trajectory of a typical pioneer began to look roughly as follows: an early obsession with photographic images and a wish to be the

magus with the box; help from a European photographer; acquisition of an Eastman Kodak camera; sometimes colonial military service; and then, perhaps, work for the state bureaucracy, producing ID photos in the wake of independence. A body of postcolonial art scholarship now lies coiled around this rich and fascinating subject.² Yet the career paths of successful studio photographers in Africa weren't all that different from those of their counterparts in Europe – even a figure like Edward Chambré Hardman, whose father enjoyed photography and whose real passions, for landscape and cityscape, lay beyond the portraits he took in Liverpool in the 1940s and 1950s. (Hardman was still taking portraits for a living after his photograph of the *Ark Royal* in the Cammell Laird shipyard made his name.)³

The Malian studio photographer, Seydou Keïta, whose photographs were on show at the Grand Palais in Paris in 2016, was apprenticed to a joiner in Bamako in 1928 at the age of seven or eight and later experimented with a Kodak Brownie which belonged to his uncle.⁴ A Frenchman working at a local processing lab gave him a technical steer and by the end of the 1930s he was making good money from portraits, visiting clients in their homes or snapping up commissions on the street. The turning point for Keïta, one of the great studio hands on the continent, came at the end of the Second World War, when another photographer, Mountaga Dembélé, returned to Mali after serving with the French colonial infantry in Europe. Dembélé set up a studio in Bamako and began training enthusiasts. He was a few years older than Keïta and is said to have been a great photographer, though only a fraction of his work survives. From Dembélé, Keïta learned to develop a good contact print, 13 x 18 cm, which, after he opened his own studio in 1948, was the staple product supplied to the customer. Keïta ran the business at full tilt until a year or so after independence in 1960, when he was asked – or probably ordered – to work for the new independence government. He kept the studio ticking over while he photographed state events, visits by foreign dignitaries, military grandees, official openings and so on. He also worked for the police, though we don't know what he did. Forensics? Mugshots? Driving permits? In 1977, he shut the studio and returned to another of his loves: tinkering with cars and mopeds. He was a good mechanic.

Keïta took at least 10,000 portraits. Some of his sitters are photographed full-face, others at an angle. 'Le portrait en buste de biais,' he said of his

three-quarter, head-and-shoulder compositions, ‘c’est moi qui l’ai inventé.’⁵ It’s quite audacious. So is the idea, which we encounter in the Grand Palais catalogue essays, that the angled shot marks a break with colonial photography, releasing the subject from the chilly condescension of the full-face shot.⁶ If so, it was an uneven, staggered break: both types of composition can be found during and after the colonial era. But photography, a colonial practice *par excellence*, ‘created a pathway for the colonised’ towards idioms of their own, far removed from the racist catalogues compiled by their European masters.⁷ In Keïta’s work – remarkable for its lack of intrusiveness – subjects may be on their mettle, but they aren’t sitting for an ethnographic inventory. The customers were paying for a record, in a single, exalted image, of what they imagined themselves or their dependants to be: who they were, their standing in the world, and who they might become; their sense of continuity and lineage (a beaming notable dandles a child on his knee) and their intimation of a new order (two young women sit astride a scooter) in a moment of dramatic change for the country. Modernity has already left its mark and now seems to guarantee the promise of full independence from the coloniser. Often – as in an image of a woman resting her head on her hands – it’s a combination of the two. Even where sitters prefer a formal, sober attitude, holding themselves a little stiffly as they might for a colonial photograph, their composure is more adornment than disguise: people are entirely, uncannily present, throughout the work – a presence that Malick Sidibé, another impressive studio photographer in Bamako, could also conjure.

The portraits are staged, to the point of theatricality. Keïta set up his studio in a compound near the railway station (also not far from the prison). His backdrops – a plain drape at first, and later batik fabrics (leafy arabesques and cloudy paisley) – could be pinned to an outer wall or moved indoors, but he preferred to do portraits in natural light, and many have a *plein air* quality. He kitted out the studio with a stock of props and costumes, from which he and his sitters could choose whatever they thought would strike the right aspirational note: two-piece suits, ties, hats, wristwatches, jewellery, fountain pens, his Vespa moped and even his Peugeot 203. In a shot of clients posing in front of the car, Keïta’s reflection can be seen in the glossy front fender.



Seydou Keïta, Untitled, 1954.

Like the rotary-dial telephone set, the radio was a virtuous analogue consumer good, with its promise of swift communication in the joined-up continent that Pan-Africanism was struggling to bring about. It was also the way people were listening to music. Looking at a photo with a radio prop from this period, you imagine Keïta listening to one of the great Malian bands or singers of the day. Each photograph in this marvellous oeuvre is evidence of his wish to bring out the best in his sitters. ‘Having your photo taken was a big event,’ he recalled. He approached his commissions like works for the stage or *tableaux vivants*. One performance only, though. Margins were tight, rolls of film were costly and Keïta almost always relied on a single exposure to get the job done.⁸

Keïta was rediscovered in the 1990s, when Mali’s musicians and singers were already surging onto the world music scene: Salif Keïta, Fanta Damba, Toumani Diabaté, Ali Farka Touré, Ballaké Sissoko – a glorious moment. The French patrons who introduced Keïta to the world revisited his archive of negatives, sent them off to labs in Europe and commissioned gigantic prints. They were a sensation when they were shown in France in the 1990s; ten years later in New York they were selling at \$16,000 a throw. They are digital miracles by comparison with Keïta’s own prints. The light in Mali was his loyal assistant: despite fivefold or tenfold enlargements,

most of the new images are crystal-clear. They bring us face to face with a luminous beauty that we can only glimpse in the original prints.



Seydou Keïta, Untitled, 1956/57.

There have been disputes about money and royalties, just as there were between West African musicians and the world-music labels that signed them up. The larger objection is based on creaky notions of authenticity and

originality and whether Keïta should be elevated to the rank of ‘artist’.⁹ He died in Paris in 2001 hoping he would: he loved the new prints. The idea that the earlier ones have a sacred authenticity and that they’re travestied by later reproductions, is pure exoticism: it wants Keïta and his subjects stranded in the middle of the last century, embalmed in Euro-Africanist nostalgia. Anyone who owns a print from the Bamako studio must of course be making the case for an intriguing, weather-beaten relic and hoping to raise the value of their asset on the back of five-figure sales for a single enlargement.

Not all Keïta’s sitters were wealthy, before or after Mali’s troubled independence, but many chose his studio props to celebrate the long-term promise of decolonisation: the restoration of selves and communities, and desegregated access to metropolitan consumer markets. A Keïta portrait was often a collaborative venture: the sitters were his principals and he was their director. If you were the descendant of a sitter for one of his great portraits you might want to claim a modest share of royalties, in view of the fabulous sums that the new prints fetch in Paris and New York. And if you were told to get lost, you might be tempted to invoke your right of consent to the reproduction of an ancestor’s image. But perhaps it’s enough for the great-grandchildren and extended family to see their progenitors achieve international celebrity in the present, as heroes of a difficult past, which they addressed with style, heroism and confidence. In the new 180 x 120 cm prints – masterpieces in their own right – we are bang up against them.

We’re Dancing Tonight: Sanlé Sory, Studio Photographer, Burkina Faso

The photographer Sanlé Sory was born in the 1940s in French West Africa. At independence in 1960 he became a ‘Voltaic’, or a citizen of Haute Volta, and in 1984, a ‘Burkinabè’: the new head of state, Thomas Sankara, had combined two noncolonial languages to rename Haute Volta as Burkina Faso, ‘the land of the upright’. By then, Sory’s work had consigned him to the land of the slightly stooped, gazing through the viewfinder or bent over the developing tray, even though in his self-portraits he is a paragon of uprightness: short and muscular, with an obvious liking for the gym. Within

a few years of independence he was running a studio in Bobo-Dioulasso, 350 kilometres west of the capital Ouagadougou, and building up a remunerative sideline by laying on dance parties and doing artwork for vinyl recordings by Burkinabè musicians. Many of his negatives and prints have survived. His work has been shown at the Cartier Foundation in Paris, the Art Institute of Chicago and other prestigious sites in Europe and the North America.¹⁰ There is as yet no record of a major Sanlé Sory solo show in an African city, although his work has been exhibited on the continent. Northern dealers and galleries have since discovered a range of extraordinary African photographers, including Sory, and shown their work to wide acclaim. The continent's arts, like its strategic minerals, are always in danger of slipping beyond the grasp of their communities.

Sory's interest in photography began when he had to get himself an ID card, an obligation imposed by the French colonial administration on people living in cities. When he showed up at a studio in Bobo-Dioulasso, he was stunned by the photographer's fee and realised that there was good money to be made with a camera. His cousin, an influential man, took him back to the studio with a very much larger sum – ten times what Sory had paid for his ID photo – and a bottle of Scotch. Negotiations went well, the bottle was drained and for the next three years Sory worked with the Ghanaian photographer Kojo Adomako. ID photos were Adomako's stock-in-trade, produced to bureaucratic specs as head-and-shoulder shots. But he also offered 'souvenir' portraits, which would turn out to be Sory's forte. In his archive there are many striking portraits of young people – singles, couples, siblings, girly covens, boyish gangs – who know how they'd like to appear to their friends and relatives, and above all, it seems, to themselves. In Sory's view, they rarely posed for posterity. 'No one ever came back to ask me to reprint a picture,' he told Matthew Witkovsky, who curated the Chicago show in 2018. 'They don't need it, and they don't care.'¹¹ The souvenir portrait is not a souvenir, to Sory's mind, so much as a gesture of faith in an exhilarating future.

This makes sense. Almost no proud male elders or imposing matriarchs can be found in Sory's work. He sold his services to younger people, whose confidence had soared after independence as Haute Volta acquired a seat at the UN. With this political *joie de vivre* came a range of careful self-positionings, an ostentatious show of youthful cool and a sense that the speed at which European fashions were moving would leave you in the dust

if you couldn't harness the force of western consumer culture. Exoticism is often thrown into reverse in Sory's photos: his subjects pose in European mode, but knowingly, as if they didn't really mean it when they flaunted a slick briefcase or stuck an ear against an analogue telephone receiver.



Sanlé Sory, *La Jeune Malienne*, 1970.

Just as often, Sory's studio customers come straight to the point: they have paid to give it their best shot and Sory will reciprocate with his. They strike the pose of their choice; there's none of the unease we sense in the colonial subject sitting for the intrusive colonial record. *La Jeune Malienne* is typical, and the open-heartedness of her portrait tells us how little the consensual photograph, devised by sitter and maker, resembles the colonial ID photo. For the sociologist Jean-Bernard Ouédraogo, the postcolonial

photographic archive is a public achievement, even though studio artist's subjects were private clients.¹²

European rule effected a steady shift away from communitarian identifications – with the village or an ethnic/linguistic group – towards that great modern instance, the individual. And as Witkovsky argues in *Sory Sanlé Volta Photo*: 'The replacement of group identification with individuated identity found its most adequate expression in the ... ID photo that colonial administrations required in Bobo [Dioulasso] and across Africa. To have one's identity specified and recorded, not only as an ethnographic type but as a juridical subject, marked a rite of initiation into modern society.' We find quite a few of Sanlé's customers sitting for group portraits identifiable as family. Others appear in traditional or ritual dress, but this isn't strictly a contradiction: in the years that followed independence, Burkinabè sitters could have it all, laying claim both to an open-ended cosmopolitanism – encompassing the western world and the Soviet bloc – and an African specificity that revived the precolonial past and stressed the importance of Indigenous cultures.

Sory wasn't born in Bobo-Dioulasso; he made his way to town from a remote village. Ouédraogo, who has interviewed many West African photographers, found that only a small number grew up in cities. Most took part in the steady movement from the countryside to a new urban life 'severed from the old social order'. It was the cities that conferred a rudimentary civic status on their inhabitants in the eyes of the French: no one living in rural areas was required to register for an ID card, but anyone moving to an urban area had to have a bureaucratic profile. Sory's photos prolong the story of identity beyond the colonial era into a moment of exuberance and self-definition, in which his customers play at being who they really are, or who they might be, as persons in a new society where modernity is an asset rather than a reminder of foreign domination. Like many studio photographers, Sory created sets for these self-performances by wheeling in props – often motor scooters – and commissioning backdrops. The best of these is an urban scene, almost a village corner, with Sory's studio, Volta Photo, taking pride of place. A beach scene with palm trees and high-rise hotels was popular with many of his customers. For more dashing poseurs, there was a VC10 on a paved apron, aircraft steps alongside, ready for boarding. You needed elegant shades and wide flares to carry this off: a studied casual look that evokes the 1960s of the

Anglosphere, far removed from the high dandyism of the Congolese Sapeurs.¹³

Sory was less of an interventionist – less of a director – in the studio than the older generation of African photographers led by Seydou Keïta and Malick Sidibé. Even Sory's demure sitters are shot with a kind of nonchalance – a matter-of-fact manner that suggests his knowingness in relation to the poverty in postcolonial Haute Volta. Pretend to be prosperous, he seems to be saying to his subjects, even though it will take years to prosper after more than half a century of colonial rule.

What he liked, mainly, was the freedom that having a camera gave him – his first was a Shanghai, a twin-lens reflex made in China – and the income it brought in. (One of many photographers interviewed by Ouédraogo told him that a single evening's work earned him half what he made in a month as an office clerk.) While it's true that Sory's photos show a society undergoing immense change, it's the photographer himself, the person with a camera, who embodies the forces driving it along: available technology, business acumen, faith in an African cutting edge and the generosity to depict people in the way they wish to be seen – as autonomous selves in an independent country facing formidable economic challenges.

Sory's easy-going style helped with his work at parties. People planning their own gigs with their own music beat a path to Volta Photo. They would appear out of nowhere, he told Witkovsky, and say: 'Sory, we're dancing tonight. We're going to celebrate, there's food, we're getting a sheep, some chicken ...' He would take charge of the photographic record for a fee. It wasn't long before he began organising dance events himself, often outside Bobo-Dioulasso. He would arrive at a prospective venue, announce a date, collate the music, emcee the event and, of course, take the photos. Moving around rural areas after harvest proved worthwhile. 'Rice, bananas, especially cotton,' he told Witkovsky. 'If cotton is selling – ooh! – farmers have money.' At these outdoor parties, known as *bals poussières* – the dancers kicked up a lot of dust – people who wanted their photos taken notified him in advance, paying upfront for the unexposed film and ordering a set number of prints, often by the roll.



Volta-Jazz record sleeve.

Sometime in the late 1960s Sory began taking photographs for record covers for Volta-Jazz, a band founded by his cousin – the same cousin who had helped him to clinch his apprenticeship with a libation of Scotch. Bobo-Dioulasso had a strong tradition of popular music in an eclectic range of styles, largely thanks to the enthusiasm of a local youth club, active in the 1930s, the Société amicale de la jeunesse dorée, of which no trace survives. But recording studios, according to Sory's archivist Florent Mazzoleni, were in short supply.¹⁴ Volta-Jazz made its name on the dinner-dance circuit, at Rotary Club events, concerts and dance halls. The band dressed in tuxedos and had a virtuoso mastery of styles, including localised Mandingo and Afro-Cuban, which had percolated up from Central Africa. This was not a dilettante outfit. When Volta-Jazz found a way around the recording problem, the artwork was assigned to Sory: his photos appear on the covers of at least a dozen singles by the band. Like the sound of Volta-Jazz, Sory's photos speak to a post-independence moment in Burkina Faso when economic security and grace were within reach. Anything was possible.

Apartheid in Monochrome

‘White Dreams and Proprieties’: David Goldblatt

‘The South African labour market,’ Charles van Onselen writes in *New Nineveh*, ‘has always been dominated by ... mining, agriculture and domestic service.’¹ Van Onselen’s two-volume history of ‘everyday life in the Witwatersrand’, a long ridge on the Highveld, explores the period from the mid-1880s when the discovery of gold propelled South Africa through a European-style industrial revolution compressed into twenty years. David Goldblatt began taking photographs in the gold-mining areas in his teens. Many of them, and the ones that followed, tell the story of South Africa’s labouring classes, predominantly Black, in a world shaped by race laws and extractive industry. Others record the varying circumstances of Afrikaners, rich or poor, with or without pretensions to a European lifestyle in the era of apartheid. These tremendous works went on show at the Pompidou Centre in 2018. Goldblatt died two months after the exhibition closed. It included his late studies under the heading ‘Structures of Domination and Democracy’: anything from wooden garbage-collectors’ carts and bleak miners’ hostels to churches and public monuments, built during and after apartheid.²

Goldblatt was born in the mining town of Randfontein in the Witwatersrand to left-wing Lithuanian Jewish parents in 1930; his mother was a typist and his father kept a men’s outfitting store. They lived in a landscape sculpted by mining and populated by miners. He remembers looking on with other children ‘as a team of twenty men, moving as one, swung a steel railway line off the ground, into the air, caught it on their shoulders and then walked it, chanting, to its place’.³ By the time he turned to photography for a living in the 1960s, Johannesburg, the gold rush capital, had more than 2 million inhabitants; at least a quarter of a million Black labourers and perhaps 30,000 whites were employed in the mines.

South Africa was producing nearly half the world's gold. On the Rand, however, the industry had peaked.

On his early forays with a camera in the 1940s, Goldblatt had photographed miners, mine dumps and infrastructure to haunting effect. Even as the mines on the Rand were running down, he continued photographing workers on the job. Several of the photographs in the show, taken between 1945 and 1972, record feats of strength and endurance: a team of mine workers hauling on a rope at the minehead; a group of shaft-sinkers huddling on the platform of a cylindrical cutting rig as it is lowered, dislodging rock from the freshly cut side wall. But he was also fascinated by encroaching ruin. In 1966 he shot an apocalyptic view of a tailings dump glowing in the sunlight. (Tailings are the unprofitable matter separated from valuable minerals and coal.) The dump, a man-made hill of waste, resembles a volcano hours after an eruption, with incandescent lava flowing evenly down one flank. In the foreground is the archaeological evidence of a rush to unimaginable riches: a huge, disused mill-race in brick and sandstone blocks. In the middle ground is a tailings wheel, the size of a Ferris wheel, that once turned at all hours, dredging off waste as Indigenous miners and migrants from elsewhere in southern Africa burrowed and died for precious raw materials.

In 1968, as more profitable mines were opening west and south of the Rand, a selection of Goldblatt's photos appeared in *Optima* magazine with an essay by Nadine Gordimer, 'A Time and Tailings'. Born in a mining town about 75 kilometres east of Randfontein, Gordimer described the mines as 'the black man's baptism by darkness and dust into Western civilisation'. Goldblatt's ambivalent tribute to a dying heartland and Gordimer's essay later appeared together as a book. In her updated essay she explained that the wage differential between white and Black miners – twelve to one in 1911 – 'had increased to more than twenty to one by 1969'. She was revising her figures at a time when trade union membership for mine workers was still restricted to whites.⁴

Goldblatt is an unerring portrait photographer, but he is also a master of absence, able to materialise the invisible subject by photographing the tools and spaces associated with labour, even when there is no worker in sight: a pile of miners' shovels or a Black maidservant's quarters in a prosperous northern suburb, monastically tidy, with a flattened cardboard box for a mat and a copy of a newspaper announcing that the Apollo 11 mission is on its

way back from the Moon. These powerful compositions, in which Goldblatt's subjects are invoked without appearing in the frame, are among the rare instances in which he catches people with their guard down – a clever conceit on his part. Many of his subjects, when they're actually in the frame, are willing participants, invited to look the camera in the eye, or at least take note of its presence.

Two or three striking exceptions can be found in his studies of *Some Afrikaners Photographed*, made mostly in the 1960s.⁵ 'In my father's clothing shop in Randfontein,' he writes, 'I served many Afrikaners ... austere, upright, unaffected people ... Most, I surmised, were supporters of the National Party and its policy of apartheid. I had great difficulty in getting my head and heart around these contradictions.' The portraits here are led by the heart but charged with the knowledge that Afrikaners struggled for centuries to master the land, locked in conflict with rival communities, and went on to lose their armed struggle against British imperialism, at immense cost. A close-up portrait (1964) of an elderly man, Oom at Geel, who was born in the 1880s and fought the British in the South African War, captures the craggy defiance of the Boers. The triumph of the National Party in 1948 was the logical consequence of those hardships, but other photographs – especially of subjects in non-negotiated poses – suggest that apartheid was a botched paradise for poorer Afrikaner families, whether they were in a spartan kitchen trying to keep their tempers over lunch or relaxing among the jumbled remains of a picnic.



David Goldblatt, *'Lashing' Shovels Retrieved from Underground, Central Salvage Yard, Randfontein Estates, 1966.*

Farming of a marginal kind – often near subsistence levels – was the lot of some of Goldblatt's Afrikaners, but it was almost impossible for Blacks to keep a stake in their traditional lands once the large-scale evictions that had driven so many of them away were formalised by the Natives Land Act of 1913. In 1980 Goldblatt accompanied two researchers from the African Studies Institute at Wits to a farmstead in Bophuthatswana, one of the artificial 'homelands', or Bantustans, created under apartheid to concentrate Black populations. Goldblatt's companions were recording the memories of Kas Maine, a Black farmer born in 1894 who had spent most of his adult life as a sharecropper on white-owned land, with more than one unscrupulous landlord, until in the 1970s he and his wife, with their cattle and maize seeds, wound up living on a meagre patch of land in a miserable Bantustan.

Kas Maine emerges in the photos as a stubborn figure who refused to give in to exploitation and dispossession, sleeping under a flimsy tin roof, surrounded by old farming machinery in constant need of repair and driving his cattle out to pasture. His destiny, late in life, was to become a key source

for histories of peasant farming in the Transvaal, including van Onselen's *The Seed Is Mine: The Life of Kas Maine*.⁶ In a caption for a shot of Maine and his wife sitting outside their shack, Goldblatt writes: 'She complained that he would not build her a house although he could afford to do so.' Maine was a patriarch, presiding over a domain of bare earth and corrugated metal.

Goldblatt was less forgiving of the white burghers of Boksburg, a small town east of Johannesburg, than he was of the hardier types included in *Some Afrikaners*. He also preferred the impromptu comings and goings of the big city to the mannered ways of a provincial backwater shaped, as he writes of Boksburg, 'by white dreams and proprieties', with its ballroom dancing, net curtains, ruched pelmets and monthly meetings of the Women's Zionist League. 'Blacks were not of this town,' he says. 'They served it, traded with it, received charity from it, and were ruled, rewarded and punished by its precepts.' We find a few of them standing with puzzled condescension among the audience at the semi-final of Boksburg's Miss Lovely Legs competition in 1980, as four young women in swimming costumes linger on the runway. This contest was for white legs only.



David Goldblatt, *Kas Maine Taking His Cattle Out to Graze, Ledig, Bophuthatswana, 1980*.

Black South Africans are omnipresent in 'The Transported of KwaNdebele', a series of photographs that follow people on the move to and from work. Forbidden to stay in parts of South Africa where there were jobs, they commuted from KwaNdebele – another jobless, semi-carceral Bantustan – and back again, daily. 'To do this,' Goldblatt writes, 'some travelled up to eight hours per day, starting at 02.45 and getting home at 22.00.' A sequence of three chiaroscuro exposures made on a bus, between 7 and 9 p.m., shows people returning from work, slumped on metal seats and eventually succumbing to the fitful sleep that presages a few hours on a bed before the cycle is repeated.

The exhibition at the Pompidou Centre turned out to be Goldblatt's send-off: the last major show in his lifetime. But the valedictory note was already struck in the curation, which gave us his work as a grand humanist project, often at the expense of its harshness and intransigence – as if the old politics had come to an abrupt end along with apartheid.

Goldblatt had his doubts about the wave of university protests in South Africa in 2015 and 2016, from 'Rhodes Must Fall' to 'Fees Must Fall'. A subtle photographer despite the starkness of the world he depicted during the apartheid years, he was not in a mood for nuance here. He was against the defacing or removal of statuary and the burning of images that cause symbolic offence. He recorded the dethroning of the Rhodes statue at the University of Cape Town by telescopic crane, a patch of cold ash where twenty paintings and two photos were burned by UCT students, and two hooks on bare wooden panelling which held collage tributes to Molly Blackburn, an anti-apartheid activist killed in a car crash in the 1980s, before they too were removed by students and burned. Goldblatt remembered her as 'a hero of the struggle against apartheid'.

How much did representations of race have to do with the summary demotion of Molly Blackburn at UCT? The burnings appeared to stage a renewal of racial hostilities, which the multiracial vanguard of the anti-apartheid struggle – the ANC, the Communist Party and militant Christianity – had done their best to dispel. But if so, surely they reflected a seething impatience with the economic privileges that whites continued to enjoy along with arriviste non-white elites who consolidated their position in the post-apartheid years. In 1965 the South African writer and critic Lewis Nkosi argued that 'White Power' was committed to mastery over Black people in the New World and Africa; that the disarray of Black

people made them an irresistible object of white abuse, and that they should have done better. 'For the strong,' he wrote, 'the weak are just too much of a temptation; and in all fairness it seems to me quite wicked for Black people to have tempted the powerful with so much powerlessness for so long.'⁷ These kinds of question go well beyond South Africa. As a personification of western attitudes and policy decisions around the world, whiteness has begun to look as ruthless as it did in Nkosi's day: in military interventions in the Middle East (high non-white civilian death tolls, rendition, torture and indefinite detention of non-whites); in the strength of anti-immigrant feeling in the EU and the US; in police murders of African Americans and their disproportionate levels of incarceration; in unstinting support from Washington and Europe for Israeli hegemony in all of Palestine. With hindsight, none of this is a surprise, but Goldblatt could have been forgiven his optimism when he photographed the members of South Africa's constitutional assembly in 1996, gathered outside the Senate House in Cape Town where they adopted the new constitution: a rainbow moment in sultry skies.

Raise, Focus, Shoot, Conceal: Ernest Cole, Photographer at Large

Photographers in the industrial age were fascinated by work. The readying of humans for their roles in the workforce was a minor subgenre of this huge documentary field. A glimpse of labour in the making was provided in the 1930s by the photographer François Kollar, shooting in a desolate concrete chamber where young French children were learning to swim.⁸ An instructor in a suit looks on from the edge of the pool. Pale white arms push forward through the dark water or extend like luminous floats either side of bobbing heads. Flooding in the pits was one of the risks these children would face when they followed their elders into France's mines, working the coalfields of the north-east.

In the 1960s, the Black South African photographer Ernest Cole (b. 1940) recorded a medical examination of adult males in the gold mines on the Witwatersrand. In Cole's picture a dozen naked men stand with their faces to the wall, arms raised. Unlike the children in Kollar's picture, Cole's

adults are doubly vulnerable, as labouring poor and racialised inferiors. Cole's politics were opaque – he didn't give much away – but his photographs suggest that he saw racism as a more decisive force in South Africa than the structural injustices of capitalism, even though the ANC – which read racism back onto class struggle – used his work to publicise their cause. White employees in the mines, he noted, 'even those working underground, and designated as miners, never touch pick or shovel or drilling machines. The brute work is done by Africans.' His photos of mining recruits came to international attention in *House of Bondage*, a study of life – and lives – in apartheid South Africa, published in the US in the 1960s and subtitled 'A South African Black Man Exposes in His Own Pictures and Words the Bitter Life of His Homeland Today'. An impressive edition, more than half a century later, includes an additional sequence of photographs and a set of critical essays on Cole's work.⁹



François Kollar, *Future Miners Learning to Swim*, Moselle, 1931.

Ernest Levi Tsoloane Kole was born in a Black township on the edge of Pretoria to a tailor and a laundress; he was one of six siblings. Intrigued by photography as a child, he became hooked in his teens. The Bantu Education Act of 1953 did for the prospects of most Black pupils in the

apartheid system. Cole was thirteen. Hendrik Verwoerd, minister of native affairs at the time, argued that there was no point teaching maths to a 'Bantu child' for whom it had no practical use. In his late teens Cole began a correspondence course with Wolsey Hall in Oxford, and another, not long after, with the New York Institute of Photography. He also gained work at *Zonk!*, a mass-circulation magazine founded in 1949 and aimed at a Black South African readership with money to spend. Not much is known about how Cole got on at *Zonk!* or what he did. The magazine carried stories about music, South African sport and beauty contests; it ran serialised fiction, noirish or spooky, and mild-mannered debates on issues of the day. *Zonk!*'s star photographer was Mabel Cetu, one of the few contributors to earn photo credits and now an object of great scholarly interest.¹⁰ Advertising was plentiful: for women readers, powdered milk, margarine, skin whiteners and deodorants (Odo-ro-no, 'a good idea for men too'); wide-brimmed hats and bicycles for the male reader. But selling a race-specific template to Black people was a challenge in a country whose laws were eating away the disposable income of its consumer base, and *Zonk!* only survived for a few more years.

In 1958 Cole moved to *Drum*, an outspoken monthly consisting of fiction, art, photography and gutsy reportage on the effects of apartheid. It ran music reviews, sports news (boxing especially), grapevine gossip, tales of misdemeanour and street life. The deeds of petty township criminals (*tsotsis*) with flamboyant dress styles and nimble fingers were a popular theme. When Cole was taken on as a junior assistant (darkroom duties and layout), the magazine's great days under Anthony Sampson and Sylvester Stein – and the energetic assistant editor Henry Nxumalo, who was murdered on an investigative assignment – were coming to an end. Stein's successor, Tom Hopkinson, was a more cautious editor, but *Drum* had assembled some of the best writers in the country, among them Es'kia Mphahlele, Lewis Nkosi and Bessie Head, as well as gifted photographers, and there was no shortage of energy.



Ernest Cole, *The Mines*: 'During group medical examinations the nude men are herded through a string of doctors' offices.'

In the early 1950s the *Drum* crew had hung out in Sophiatown, a suburb north-west of Johannesburg inhabited mostly by low-income Black freeholders and their live-in tenants, roughly 55,000 in all; the rest – a few thousand – were coloured, Indian and Chinese. Sophiatown was a patchwork of modest wealth and downward mobility. It was also the setting for something akin to the Harlem Renaissance in New York during the 1920s. White intellectuals and dissidents shuttled back and forth, mixing with novelists, dramatists, poets and artists who had turned the neighbourhood into a hub of culture and politics. But Cole arrived on the scene too late to catch the flavour of the place. In 1955, 2,000 armed police were deployed to evict the residents (most were relocated to Soweto) and the long process of demolition began. Sophiatown was renamed Triomf.

Cole was young, apparently unassuming, profoundly ambitious. On one occasion at *Drum* he seized on the chance to stand in for an absentee on a photoshoot for a Chamber of Mines advertising spread (the magazine ticked over on mining revenues). The mineworkers on the Reef made a lasting impression on him. After *Drum*, he did a stint at the daily *Bantu World* and returned to the mining compounds to gather material for *House of Bondage*. 'To the white guards,' he recalled, 'I was just another kaffir and they paid

no attention to me ... I had considerable freedom to see what I wanted to see.’¹¹ By then he had learned to insinuate his way into the white man’s domain unannounced, shoot a roll of film and fade away like a wraith. This was the *modus operandi* that enabled many scenes in *House of Bondage*.

The results of Cole’s ice-cool forays into dangerous territory often look poised and considered, as if he’d been assigned to shoot a commercial or a sports-day prizegiving. It’s said that he used a Yashica-C with a waist-level viewfinder. That would make sense of the suggestion that he hid his camera in a sandwich bag, having opened a hole for the lenses. Many photographers, amateurs included, liked this analogue waist-level arrangement: bag or no bag, you could take a picture without telegraphing your intentions. (In war-torn Algeria, as Cole was mastering his trade, the young Pierre Bourdieu was taking hundreds of pictures for his research files with a Zeiss Ikoflex, often ‘without anybody noticing’.¹²) But we know, too, that Cole had his hands on a Nikon rangefinder when he shot most of the material for *House of Bondage* in the mid-1960s: his flatmate Struan Robertson, also a photographer, remembers him practising with the eye-level viewfinder for maximum speed of execution ‘like a handgun expert’.¹³ Raise, focus, shoot, conceal.

This kind of discretion isn’t unusual for photojournalists, but Cole’s was existential, a studious absenteeism. He could poke fun at his colleagues or get fiery, arguing furiously over a credit for a disputed photo that had appeared in print, but mostly he was courteous and inscrutable, a virtuoso in the art of anger management in an era when tempers ran high. The assault on Sophiatown had left people, including staff at *Drum*, with a sense of loss that can’t have escaped him. Eersterust, a suburb of Pretoria where his parents were freeholders, had been designated a coloured area before they were kicked out in 1960 and their house was razed. ‘Our neighbourhood was rubble,’ he wrote in *House of Bondage*. ‘Our house was a pile of bricks.’ In the same year the Pan-Africanist Congress stole a march on their rivals, the ANC, and took to the streets of Sharpeville to demonstrate against the hated passbook – an internal travel document that restricted freedom of movement for Black South Africans. Police opened fire on the protesters, leaving 69 dead and 189 injured. In his essay for this new edition, James Sanders suggests that the fate of Eersterust ‘would have taught [Cole] that the struggle with apartheid can never be a fair contest. To

resist one had to learn to cheat.’¹⁴ The Sharpeville massacre, which took place on Cole’s twentieth birthday, may well have been another lesson in the same vein.

Cole went on to play the race hierarchies in South Africa for all he was worth. He changed his name from Kole and persuaded the apartheid authorities to reclassify him as a so-called coloured person, allowing him to move more freely in white and coloured areas without a pass. His re-assignment was a rare feat and something of a mystery. Perhaps he persuaded the authorities that he had once lived in a coloured area and that de facto he was a coloured person. Or that he was an orphan of coloured parentage. Or perhaps he was pressured to trade information about ANC activists in return for his new status: a bargain he never appears to have kept. Quite when apartheid security first took an interest in Cole is hard to say. In his memoir, *In the Fiery Continent*, Tom Hopkinson recalled that someone in the *Drum* darkroom had been approached to work as an informer, though he doesn’t mention Cole by name.¹⁵ It’s possible that Cole’s views as a teenager inclined him to the PAC, which envisaged race struggle – ‘one settler, one bullet’ – as the path to change in South Africa. If he crossed the white/Black divide in his dealings with editors and mentors – or importunate apartheid spooks – it wasn’t to make common cause with white people. Then again, there’s no evidence that he lost sleep about his advantage as a classified coloured over his fellow Black photographers, whose careers were hobbled by the pass laws. The profession was light on camaraderie.¹⁶

In the early 1960s, Cole was selling pictures to the *Johannesburg Sunday Express*, the *Rand Daily Mail* and *New Age*, a left-wing paper set up in the 1950s when its predecessor the *Guardian* was banned. He had become a devotee of Henri Cartier-Bresson. Poring over editions of *The Decisive Moment* (1952) and *The People of Moscow* (1955), he began to conceive a book of his own that would ‘show the world what the white South African had done to the Black’. But freelancing for *New Age* left him exposed. Ruth First, a militant in the South African Communist Party and then the ANC, had an influential hand in the paper, and anyone who came within her ambit – including Cole, irrespective of his politics – would have been of interest to the intelligence services. This is another moment when the police could

have put the screws on Cole. (*New Age* was banned; First was detained and left the country after her release; she was assassinated in Maputo in 1982.)

A handful of superb sharp-shooter images in *House of Bondage* show *tsotsis* on the move in downtown neighbourhoods: a wallet is lifted in one scene; a man in another scene is mugged. Both victims are white. In one of these incidents, it's alleged, Cole had befriended a gang and hung around, biding his time for the kill. The police arrived within minutes. Cole was detained and asked to testify in court against the muggers. Whether or not he'd been pressured to inform in the past – at *Drum* perhaps, or during his reclassification hearings, or later as a contributor to *New Age* – his arrest as a witness to a felony in broad daylight put him in an impossible position. If he refused to testify he would face a spell in detention, where investigations were unlikely to stop at a one-off case against a bunch of petty thieves. The time had come for Cole to pack his bags.

He had struck up an uneasy friendship with Joseph Lelyveld, the *New York Times* correspondent in Johannesburg. Lelyveld suspected that he was an apartheid informer, a hunch he came to regret. In 1966 Cole, a devout Catholic on the face of it, was waiting for a permit to travel abroad for a pilgrimage to Lourdes. By then Lelyveld had been ordered to leave South Africa. In April, on the day Cole received his travel authorisation, Lelyveld carried a package of Cole's contact sheets out of the country.¹⁷ Cole left in May and never returned. In his luggage were a handful of layouts and prints. How his negatives followed him into exile is unclear. In one account, he gave some of them to Robertson, who sent them out later. In another, they were left for safekeeping with a staffer at the United States Information Service in Johannesburg. If the USIS connection is true, it marks another strange turn in the winding road to the publication of *House of Bondage*. The USIS was a soft-power public-diplomacy organ at a time when apartheid South Africa was one of Washington's staunch Cold War partners. With the US enacting civil rights legislation at home and prosecuting a war in Vietnam, the service could well have preferred to cultivate the PAC, whose politics were by a margin more acceptable than the ANC's Marxist programme. Single-minded and unclubbable, Cole may not have cared either way.

He spent the summer in Europe raising interest in his idea for a devastating photo essay on South Africa. The *Sunday Times* and *Stern* were

keen, and so was Magnum: Cole's project was no longer a work in progress but a fully formed achievement in his mind's eye and he had a dummy of the book to show for it. He arrived in New York in September. At some stage along the way, he was reunited with the negatives for *House of Bondage* (his USIS benefactor remembers delivering several boxes to the US embassy in Nairobi). The New York offices of Magnum sold a few photos to *Life* magazine and hired a small press to assemble the book; Random House acquired the package and Lelyveld wrote the introduction. The finished product was a huge success, with foreign rights selling fast and the US edition going rapidly into a second print run. It was banned in South Africa.

House of Bondage is a methodical guide in fifteen chapters to apartheid's institutions (the pass, the police, education, healthcare), its injustices (grinding poverty, child homelessness, forced removals), its labour arrangements (domestic service, mining, arduous travel to and from the workplace) and the consolations on offer to Black South Africans (crime, religion, alcohol). There is also a dismissive chapter on the African middle class, whom Cole saw as incapable of political leadership 'because of their emotional alliance with whites'. Each sequence is prefaced with a brilliant exposition – surely the work of several hands, as Cole's copy went through a demanding editorial process – which sets the scene and then supplies the wider context.

Occasionally Cole tells a story in the first person. 'My own introduction to hospitals came ... when I was involved in a motorbike accident in downtown Johannesburg. The time was a few minutes after noon on a Saturday. Both my legs seemed to be broken and I could do no more than pull myself to the sidewalk and sit there.' The police arrive quite quickly, but he waits two and a half hours for an ambulance. He spends six days in Baragwanath Hospital, Soweto, waiting for surgery and leaves after twenty-six days, including a stint in the 'dumping ward', where 'many of the supposed convalescents ... were bleeding, some dying. Some were about to be discharged with incompletely healed fractures.' Cole went back to Baragwanath for his chapter on healthcare. 'Sometimes I just walked in with my camera concealed. Other times I slipped in after hours, dodging the guards.' One memorable shot takes the viewer's eye the length of a ward. Ruched promontories, where bed cradles raise patients' blankets above their leg injuries, create the impression of a chain of hills. Others show 'floor

patients' moved outdoors into the sunlight during daytime hours and mobile 'stretcher cases' inside the building in a queue for X-rays. ('Some,' the brisk marginal note tells us, 'do not live to end of line.')

The stillness of the figures in these shots falls short of resignation: Cole portrays them as momentary losers who already have the upper hand in a long waiting game. They keep their counsel; time and demography, it's implied, are on their side. Like François Kollar's children training for a mining disaster, Cole's pupils in his chapter 'Education for Servitude' are being primed for a harsh generic destiny, hunched over their exercise books on the floor of a bare classroom. ('Government,' his note tells us, 'is casual about furnishing schools for Blacks.')

His portraits of the immobilised include a banished person, Piet Mokoena, dozing in a remote detention camp in Cape Province with an African-language Bible spread over his face. The hard covers are missing and the uppermost pages are open at Corinthians 2. Banishment, Cole explains, was a way to separate influential dissenters, mostly in rural areas – 'tribal chiefs, village headmen, or simply men with leadership qualities' – from their communities 'in the general public interest'.

Cole took an ecumenical view of religion, arguing that traditional Christianity was losing out to syncretic faiths and Evangelism. Animist cults, meanwhile, had hung on to much of their vitality. Every religious practice, in his chapter on belief systems, finds its likeness in another. In one shot a sick woman in a candlelit room is about to receive the Communion wafer from a priest. The metaphor of Christian sacrament is juxtaposed, in the next, with an ancestor-veneration rite where an initiate drinks blood from the throat of a sacrificial goat 'to prepare her for possession by an ancestral spirit'. Cole was drawn, like a lot of South African photographers, to the exotic quality of small sectarian churches and Indigenous traditions: he didn't foresee the passionate arguments that would breathe new life into mainstream Christian congregations as eloquent members of the clergy came out against apartheid.

Some of the most striking photos in *House of Bondage* anticipate the chaotic phase that lay ahead. Cole's Black commuters scuffling out of focus as they race for trains or clamber over ticket barriers catch the insurrectionary potential of able-bodied people on the move in large numbers, in deliberate contrast to his muted studies in 'Bantu' schools, rundown hospitals and dusty banishment camps. Even his shots of *tsotsis*

mugging white men resemble hit-and-run skirmishes in the war against minority rule. An irritable white man lashing out at a child beggar becomes an icon of racist contempt. These shots, and the ones he took through a hole in his legendary lunch bag, help to explain Cole's interest in Cartier-Bresson's work, especially *Images à la sauvette* (ill-gotten images, dodgy business). Its English title, *The Decisive Moment*, doesn't really catch what Cole admired about Cartier-Bresson.¹⁸

House of Bondage opened up a promising future for Cole in the US. On the back of its success, the Ford Foundation put up money for a two-part project about Black lives in the US. One element would lift his approach in *House of Bondage* and apply it to the Southern states; the other would document ghetto communities in the big cities. But Cole failed to come good. Had he foreseen that exile in the US, with its tenuous resemblance to apartheid South Africa, would keep him in the same line of business and then thought better of it? If the experiences of contemporary African Americans and late-colonial Africans were comparable at all, there was a marked difference by the late 1960s between the effects of structural racism on Black citizens in the US and the legalised immiseration of Cole's South Africans living under a race dictatorship. Cole may have felt that he couldn't repurpose *House of Bondage* as a universal road show of Black suffering. His life unravelled and he began to doubt the purpose of photography. In the 1970s he was shuttling between the US and Sweden, losing his bearings. He went on to become a penniless marginal stranded in New York. On a hospital TV, a week before he died in February 1990, he watched Mandela walk away from Victor Verster Prison.

Today Cole is remembered as one of the great witnesses to the apartheid years, thanks in part to a touring exhibition of his work in 2011 organised by the Hasselblad Foundation. In 2017 a cache of 60,000 negatives, deposited by an unknown intermediary, was released to his nephew Leslie Matlaisane by a Swedish bank: some dated from Cole's days in South Africa; others from his tentative field trips in the US before his Ford Foundation venture bombed. Magnum shared the negatives with the Cole family; a few prints are available on the Magnum website.¹⁹ The Hasselblad Foundation has given some of its own holdings to Cole's descendants but has hung on to more than 500 vintage prints – an ongoing source of dispute between the Foundation and the family. More of Cole's work will see the light of day.

A suite of photos that failed to make the cut in earlier editions of *House of Bondage* appears in the latest under the heading ‘Black Ingenuity’ (Cole’s working title). It concentrates mostly on Dorkay House, an abandoned garment factory in Johannesburg that was turned into a workshop and performance venue after the lease was acquired by the Union of South African Artists in the 1950s. With a big space for dance and theatre, and offices repurposed for music lessons, Dorkay House would come to stand, in noisy, emblematic miniature, for the old buzz of Sophiatown. The jazz musical *King Kong*, a box office triumph about a Black heavyweight boxer, was rehearsed in the building.²⁰ Miriam Makeba, Athol Fugard, Abdullah Ibrahim and Hugh Masekela were among the artists who came and went.



Ernest Cole, Untitled, Dorkay House, Johannesburg, 1965.

Cole must have taken these photos in the 1960s, when the prospects for Black artists were bleak. 'Remnants,' he wrote on his draft chapter folder, 'of culture, creativity, and of all the things they failed to stamp out.' Even

so, he was at home in this anti-apartheid warren and his word 'ingenuity' seems to honour the busy African self-reinvention he could still see in the workshops: ingenuity was about making good from making do, trying to keep the show on the road. In one image a young boy in short trousers, short sleeves and tie is poised on tiptoe tuning an antique three-string double bass. By then the big celebrity jazz bassists of the day, Ernest Mothle and Johnny Dyani, were on the path to exile and the international jazz circuit. Talent was seeping out of the country. Makeba, Masekela, Ibrahim and others were gone; Cole's turn was coming. Beside his little bass player we catch a glimpse of a teacher-accompanist: the sleeve of his shirt, his fingers on the keys of a saxophone. Behind them both is a window onto a brick wall coated with whitewash.

Part IV

Remasters

Binyavanga Wainaina: Writer, Sampler, Spam

Binyavanga Wainaina became an African literary celebrity in 2005, when *Granta* published his instructions for travel writers, journalists and aid workers on ‘how to write about Africa’. ‘Be sure to leave the impression that without your intervention and your important book, Africa is doomed,’ he wrote. ‘Among your characters you must always include the Starving African, who wanders the refugee camp nearly naked and waits for the benevolence of the West.’ African characters ‘should be colourful, exotic, larger than life – but empty inside’; animals ‘must be treated as well-rounded, complex characters ... elephants are ... good feminists or dignified patriarchs. So are gorillas.’¹ The essay was both funny and sobering for outsiders who go on the record about Africa. How could they fail to see themselves in the mirror Wainaina held up to their pomposity? Anthropology was the only line of work that he didn’t have time to make fun of before he died in 2019 from the last of a series of strokes, a few years after being diagnosed with HIV. He remains one of the great anglophone satirists of postcolonial Africa.

Wainaina was born in Kenya in 1971 and left for South Africa in 1991 to study for a degree in accounting, which he abandoned before settling in Cape Town. He hustled a meagre living in food journalism and catering (he was an excellent cook) and soon cut loose from the bitter disputes unfolding in the rainbow nation. By the early 2000s he was back in Kenya. He had published in South Africa and was meeting other African writers, including Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, in a flourishing digital commons where novelists, poets and essayists were exchanging drafts. In 2002, he took a shot at the Caine Prize, digging out ‘Discovering Home’, a riotous account of his return to the mother country that had been languishing on an editor’s desk in the US and was eventually printed without the changes on which Wainaina had insisted. He rushed a new version to the online journal *G21* and submitted the result to the Caine judges, who nixed it on the grounds that *G21* wasn’t a serious – that is, print – publication.²

For Wainaina, Caine's reluctance to accept digital submissions was the final straw, after years of frustration with the African publishing scene. In the 1960s, the editors of Heinemann's African Writers Series had dreamed of sending books from warehouse to bookshops to readers across the continent but were hampered by logistics. Local African publishers were thin on the ground and the corresponding infrastructure mostly lacking. African cinema, too, was fraught with difficulties. State funding from African governments in the 1960s and 1970s came with lethargic infusions of money and hands-on censorship.³ By the 1980s it was a niche affair for American and European audiences. Africa's great directors established their names outside the continent. As the Cold War drew to a close, a cinema in Africa showing anything other than kung-fu movies or cast-offs from Hollywood and the Soviet bloc was a rarity. The outstanding success stories of the analogue era were Nollywood's direct-to-video releases dating from the early 1990s and the free music (African and non-African) that took off in the 1970s thanks to audio cassette technology, which enabled hand-to-hand transmission even if it flew in the face of copyright. But Wainaina wasn't raising a flag for piracy when he challenged the Caine judges' decision. 'If in the last twelve months,' he asked them, 'not a single collection of writing or short stories has been published in Africa, where do you think you're going to get submissions from?'

There are grand statements in 'Discovering Home' of the sort that appeal to people who give out literary prizes – 'Kenya's economy is on the brink of collapse, but we march on like safari ants' – and lyrical moments: 'The Kikuyu grass by the side of the road is crying silver tears the colour of remembered light.'⁴ The judges had second thoughts and awarded Wainaina first prize. He invested his winnings in a literary magazine, *Kwani?* (So what?), based in Nairobi. The magazine led off with a print edition (and stuck to the format). The first issue ran work by the Kenyan writer Muthoni Garland, the Tanzanian cartoonist Gado and a piece by Njabulo Ndebele on the South African singer Brenda Fassie; 'Weight of Whispers', a short story by Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor, won the Caine Prize the following year.⁵

Wainaina's *Granta* essay projected him into the literary firmament as a solo African astronaut. This was a long way from the early postcolonial era, when writers on the continent had been introduced to the rest of the world as Team Africa: Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Ayi Kwei Armah, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Bessie Head, Mongo Beti, Es'kia Mphahlele – the list went

on. Wainaina himself was modest about his ascent: he saw himself as one of many young writers who had emerged online, creating a pan-African literary idiom for the twenty-first century.

‘How to Write About Africa’ set the tone for a weary scepticism about the way non-Africans behave or speak when they arrive on the continent. For the British-Nigerian essayist Dipo Faloyin, humanitarianism is seldom better than the disasters it proposes to address, and often a cover for more pernicious motives. Celebrities are particularly self-serving in this regard. In Faloyin’s essay ‘The Birth of White Saviour Imagery’, Wainaina’s ‘how to’ becomes a caustic ‘how not to’: ‘You should avoid picking up random children you do not know for a photo that you then publish online ... no matter how cute or how poor they are.’⁶ In ‘Why Do Western Media Get Africa Wrong?’, the Kenyan writer Nanjala Nyabola argues that the first western journalist to arrive on the scene and file a story (often a disaster story) is treated as a more reliable source than local bloggers or reporters. The result, she writes, is often an unwitting description of ‘what the West is not’ – a chaotic world, riven by ethnic tension, poverty and conflict – even though a foreign correspondent from an African country would have no trouble picking out the same fault-lines in Europe or the US.⁷ There’s not much evidence in contemporary western journalism for the kinds of parody Wainaina offered in his *Granta* essay: a survey of French and British media coverage of Africa between 2007 and 2012 found no support for the suggestion that terms such as ‘darkness’ and ‘tribalism’ predominated, or that the continent was presented as a ‘homogenous entity’.⁸ But Wainaina was sure that residual attitudes about Africa hadn’t disappeared.

His *bête blanche* was the Polish journalist Ryszard Kapuściński, one of *Granta*’s most eminent contributors in the 1980s and early 1990s and the writer on African subjects most capable, Wainaina explained in a piece for the South African *Mail & Guardian*, of turning him into ‘an Angry Black Man’. He describes a party in New York that Kapuściński, in town for a PEN conference, was supposed to attend where he waited for the chance to confront him. When Kapuściński failed to arrive, Wainaina downed a consolation martini and approached Salman Rushdie. ‘I stood in front of The Rushdie, somewhat nervously. Then I asked him why he had invited the racist writer Kapuściński to come to the PEN conference.’ Rushdie was elusive and wandered off, so Wainaina grabbed another martini and

recapped Kapuściński's 'all-time classic lines about Africa': 'Let us remember that fear of revenge is deeply rooted in the African mentality'; 'Africans believe that a mysterious energy circulates through the world'; 'Africans eat only once a day, in the evening'; 'Darkness unnerves them, they may flatly refuse to drive after sunset.' He scorned Kapuściński-land as a 'left-leaning, Rider Haggard world of strange, voiceless, dark peoples doing strange, voiceless, dark things'.⁹

Wainaina's target is the racist trope. *How to Write About Africa* was not a post facto critique of colonialism. It was too late for that, in his view, and you can't fault him on his knowledge of African class struggles, neo-colonialism or the colonial past. But he was born in 1971, a year before Walter Rodney published *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, and still in his teens when Mandela was released from detention and 'multiparty' became the exhilarating demand in Kenya, after decades of sclerotic one-party rule. Wainaina belonged to a second-wave, post-independence cohort that could put the past – and the Cold War – behind them without feeling they'd lost track of history: it was Africa's moment and only wan academics and backsliders, to his mind, were still insisting on the legacy of colonialism (he staked out the ground for these arguments in his impressionist memoir, *One Day I Will Write About This Place*).¹⁰

In 2013, interviewed on Al Jazeera, Wainaina argued that international donors were undermining local initiatives in Kenya and providing cover for corrupt politicians. The interviewer, Folly Bah Thibault, a French-Guinean, shot back: 'But isn't corruption a consequence – an effect – of colonialism?' 'How?' Wainaina asked politely. 'We are now fifty years after colonialism ... we are sovereign, self-determined nations dealing with our own fate ... so to hark back to [colonialism] is also looking for a kind of victimhood that's not helpful. Take the person who's stolen from the till and arrest him.'¹¹ He was imagining a western model of accountability that would transfer fluently to regimes in Africa, where many judicial systems, unlike those in the US or Europe, lacked the resources or the clout to prosecute wayward politicians. He was in his early forties and his generational optimism hadn't worn thin.

By then, he was repurposing the approach of his *Granta* essay to make fun of African dictatorships. Rule 1 in 'How to Be a Dictator': 'Be the richest man in your country.' Rule 11: 'Do not send all the money you steal

to Switzerland and do not give it to your wife.’ Rule 16: ‘Love China.’ In ‘How to Be an African’, he accused the North American diaspora of overblown claims that the African mothership was the origin of civilisation: ‘The Tutsis were ancient Phoenicians and Greeks ... Jesus was an African ... We invented coffee ... every single one of us is descended from kings and queens ... Pushkin’s great grandfather was from Cameroon ... Everybody say *Mamaaaa ... Africaaaaaaaaaa*.’¹² By this time, ‘how to’ was a hit-and-miss affair.

The best reboot by far is ‘How to Write About Africa II: The Revenge’. In this short piece, published in *Bidoun* in 2010, Wainaina explains how the original essay came about. He was enraged, he writes, by the 1994 ‘Africa’ issue of *Granta*, which he first came across in the early 2000s. He describes it, wonderfully, as a ‘Greatest Hits of “Hearts of Fuckedness”’:

It wasn’t the grimness that got to me, it was the stupidity. There was nothing new, no insight, but lots of ‘reportage’ – Oh, gosh, wow, look, golly ooo – as if Africa and Africans were not part of the conversation, were not indeed living in England across the road from the *Granta* office.

He dashed off a ‘rambling email’ to Ian Jack, then editor of *Granta*, who commissioned him to write a piece for a forthcoming ‘Africa’ issue. Jack assured Wainaina that he would make amends for the earlier issue overseen by his predecessor, Bill Buford. Wainaina agreed, but when he came unstuck with his assignment, Jack suggested instead that ‘we publish your long, crazy email’. Wainaina agreed and as he tells it, became the arbiter of what visitors to African countries could and couldn’t say. ‘I went viral; I became spam ... Now I am “that guy”, the conscience of Africa: I will admonish you and give you absolution ... Fuck *Granta* ... thanks, *Granta*.’¹³

In an earlier issue – not the one that infuriated Wainaina – *Granta* ran a brief piece of reportage I had turned in about the conflict in South Africa’s townships that followed Mandela’s release in 1990.¹⁴ I wouldn’t care to revisit it and I haven’t: I’m sure Wainaina is right that eyewitness accounts such as mine often fail to provide genuine insight. Buford wanted his contributors to show without telling, as any teacher in a creative writing

class would have asked of their students. This routine aesthetics of ellipsis is Wainaina's strongest objection to the *Granta* manner. Within a few years of the killings in the South African townships, the international press corps had moved on to the wars in the former Yugoslavia, which required a lot of telling. In 1995 Michael Holman – a Rhodesian dissident under Ian Smith's regime who went on to become Africa editor at the *Financial Times* – confessed privately to a perverse sense of relief that press coverage of ethnic conflict was no longer ghettoised in Africa. Wainaina was too young at the time to confer 'absolution' on any western reporter who had filed from Africa, but the best of them, like Holman, were already on the case. And by the mid-1990s, European readers who deplored the barbarism in Rwanda as a purely African phenomenon were forced to reckon with Srebrenica.

Wainaina had long understood that he was gay. He came out in 2014 in an essay for the online journal *Africa Is a Country*. In the opening passage, he imagines himself by his mother's deathbed, telling her what he'd wanted to explain since he was a boy. In the next section – 'the right version of events' – he is on the point of leaving South Africa to visit her when his uncle calls to tell him he's too late. 'I am 29,' he writes. 'It is 11 July 2000. I, Binyavanga Wainaina, quite honestly swear I have known I am a homosexual since I was five.'¹⁵

Wainaina was reluctant to repeat generalities about being gay in Africa. The gloomy stats tell us that of the more than sixty states that still criminalise same-sex activity, nearly half are African.¹⁶ Discrimination against LGBT communities is one of the rare agendas on which citizens of African states and their governments tend to align, with spontaneous homophobic violence on the one hand and harsh legislation on the other. But Wainaina knew that if he went to town on the subject of African homophobia, a new round of western finger-wagging aimed at fellow Kenyans (and citizens across the continent) would follow. In an interview for National Public Radio, he joked – in deadly earnest – about the way his decision to come out would be presented: 'In the heart-of-gay-homophobia-darkness in Africa, Binyavanga writes of peace. Binyavanga explains how homophobia in Africa works ... I get the sense that it's this thing of "My God, you Africans are very homophobic, I'm going to go and report it to the West."' ¹⁷

By then, his ‘how to’ gadget could be customised by anyone who fancied their chances. ‘How NOT to Write About Queer South Africa’, by the sociologist Zethu Matebeni, catches Wainaina’s manner in its opening paragraph: ‘To help the reader, replace LGBT with gay. In later texts, put the word queer in the title. Like gay, queer does the same work, but sounds better. Don’t worry that most South Africans do not use the word queer, they will all soon catch onto it.’¹⁸ Matebeni goes on to compile an inventory of clumsy assumptions about LGBT. Some of them are well intentioned, others are not, but she is ruthlessly impartial: neither hostile homophobes nor aimless droves of liberal handwringers come out well. The aim of the essay, which plays fair and dirty with allies and enemies alike, is to strike a pre-emptive blow against the kind of western condescension Wainaina had foreseen.

A few months after he announced that he was gay, Wainaina travelled to Senegal to interview Youssou N’Dour.¹⁹ He had already published superb pieces of reportage from Senegal, South Sudan and Ghana. Many are collected in *How to Write About Africa* and might be mistaken for a kind of docufiction: Wainaina has the descriptive powers of a novelist and the will to imagine his way inside the people he meets. But we’re not *chez* Kapuściński, who set out with the piece he had in mind and groomed, or created, his incidental detail to fit. Wainaina’s repertoire of voices is extensive, on occasion puzzling. Beside those of his interlocutors and his own narrative voice, there are extraneous, unnamed speakers – other versions of Wainaina – that emerge from his conversations with himself. They don’t seem to belong in the piece until you see that it couldn’t exist without them.

In his interview with N’Dour this montage is so rich that we could be listening to a DJ set: the Nigerian writer Akin Adegboke hears Wainaina’s prose as elaborate ‘sampling’ and describes him as a master of the African ‘remix’: agile, multilayered, fully promiscuous across genres.²⁰ But when it came to sexual politics, Wainaina was plainspoken. ‘There is nothing that is a priority about being a homosexual and an African,’ he said in a 2015 TedX talk. ‘I am living in plain light; I am not living in a dark continent. I will stand free, as I need to be ... and nobody will stop me from going where I will.’²¹

The title of the Youssou N'Dour remix – ‘It’s Only a Matter of Acceleration Now’ – alerts us to the pace Wainaina means to set as he lands in Dakar and reverses with a squeal of tyres into a long story from the 1980s about N'Dour bumping into Neneh Cherry in a Paris airport, or rather crashing into her and helping her up from the ground with a bleeding lip. We can’t tell how far the account is embellished, but we know that N'Dour and Cherry became friends and collaborators: their single ‘7 Seconds’ was a big hit in 1994. Next Wainaina is prepping for his interview with the great man by getting drunk in a nightclub in Dakar, where he embarrasses himself, he suspects, by twirling his arms over his head on the dancefloor like a tourist from Europe (or perhaps just from Kenya). Remorseful, he swims out from the corniche the following morning and hooks up later with a musicologist for an education in the hybrid genealogy of N'Dour’s music. Here and there he throws in reflections on his hangover and his swimming technique: a lifeguard helps him to work on his breaststroke – ‘kick my legs and propel forward’.

Occasionally he wants to throw up and thinks, if he did, it would be unadulterated gin and tonic – which is pure Gonzo journalism, purged of Kapuściński’s disingenuousness. N'Dour tells Wainaina that musical traditions survive in West Africa ‘precisely because they are not the priority of the political elite and the government’, but that this is ‘also a recipe for frustration’. He goes on to praise the informal sector in Senegal, where a market trader in traditional African dress can arrive at a bank in his Mercedes and make a cash deposit larger than a politician’s. Wainaina lets this pass without comment. In his next paragraph, he’s back in the sea. ‘Five, six, seven strokes and I find a rhythm.’ The piece is framed as a circular journey. It begins with a question, put to Wainaina by his Senegalese chauffeur: ‘Are you prepared for the interview?’ In the final sentence, Wainaina revisits that question and asks himself: ‘Are you ready to interview Youssou N'Dour?’

After Wainaina’s death, ‘It’s Only a Matter of Acceleration Now’ was talked up as a possible title for a posthumous collection, but there’s been no sign of one. In 2023 the American composer Lamin Fofana (West African diaspora, out of Sierra Leone and Guinea) borrowed the title for a short album dedicated to ‘the great Binyavanga Wainaina’.²² Fofana does his best to catch Wainaina’s exuberance, but it’s all on the page.

William Kentridge and John Akomfrah

Descent of the Coffee Plunger: William Kentridge

William Kentridge was born in Johannesburg in 1955 and grew up in apartheid South Africa. His parents were lawyers: his father Sydney acted for regime opponents, including Nelson Mandela, and for their relatives, including Steve Biko's family after he was murdered in custody; his mother Felicia was one of the founders of the Legal Resources Centre, providing support inside and outside the courts for poor South Africans and campaigning against the country's pass laws. Apartheid is an insistent presence in many of Kentridge's films, prints and drawings, but so are the grime and oppression of an industrialised economy on the southern tip of Africa. For Kentridge, the generic vision of the impenitent capitalist mine-owner who drives his workers under and into the ground is adapted for the South African context, where racist legislation favoured management in a life-and-death stand-off with the labouring poor (largely Black). He sees the Afrikaner ascendancy (1948–94) as a moment in a longer history that precedes apartheid and continues beyond it. He is fascinated by the coincidence in the nineteenth century of settler colonialism with industrialisation and rapid capitalisation, and hints at its consequences in the twenty-first, where classes and cultures remain at odds: exhausted Indigenous communities versus prosperous, cosmopolitan extractive cultures; new generations of African poor versus new African masters. Like John Akomfrah, Kentridge is steeped in his analogue sources, including colonial archives, mining-company ledgers and scratchy phonograph recordings. Unlike Akomfrah, who transposes film and audio archives fluently into a digital sublime, Kentridge lingers in the space of the studio, where we get to see the hand of the artist at work. This is not the hand of Honwana in *We Killed Mangy-Dog and Other Stories*, which sets the writer's seal on his work with a bold, tautological image, so much as a record of sketching, drawing, tinkering and montage, before the finished

product is ready for release. For Kentridge – an acclaimed director of opera – the artist’s workshop is also a kind of a theatre.

If many of Kentridge’s works depend on digital technology to get them from studio to audience, many more are rehearsed and performed with live actors or dispatched in crates from one show to the next. Like Disney, Kentridge is a master of animation who can bring an inert object to life and stage a puppet show featuring a human figure, a demon or an animal. *Right into Her Arms* (2016) is a mini-theatrical work that is reassembled (then dismantled) every time it’s shown. It consists of a raised stage, three metres long by about a metre high, dressed with a flimsy backdrop of beige, brown, grey. Here and there are torn swatches of yellow, green and maroon. At first we seem to see an austere Kurt Schwitters collage from the early 1920s, but we can’t be sure. Close up, we discover unadorned cardboard, plain or coloured card. The wings of the stage are decorated with pages from a dictionary. Front of stage are two rectangular mobile panels, MDF or cork, decorated like the rest and attached to a guide rail that runs along the top of the proscenium. They are driven left and right by an electric motor, or set off on an angular course and made to pirouette through 360 degrees. Mostly they trundle to and fro; on occasion they whizz or flounce; once or twice they cross.

In the show, which lasts eleven minutes, a recorded montage of images, still and moving, is beamed onto this protean set from a projector: ink splashes, ink and charcoal drawings, fragments of libretto and video outtakes, all retrieved from the workshop of ideas, materials and players that Kentridge put together for his production of Alban Berg’s *Lulu*.¹ *Right into Her Arms* restages the conception, design and evolution of the production as a kinetic notebook, full of surprise and comedy. As the panels go this way and that, the projected images are refracted across two, sometimes three planes. The little play reaches its climax over a soundtrack of Webern and Schoenberg and a recital by Kentridge of passages from Schwitters’s sound poem *Ursonate*. At that point we’ve begun to realise that the panels are no longer backdrops but ungainly understudies, doing their best to rehearse the torment of the characters in *Lulu*.

All the Kentridge hallmarks are on this piece. The references to early-twentieth-century modernism that announce his loves and loyalties. The celebration of old, pre-wireless technologies and mechanical motion – we see clumsy loops of cable on the floor, scrawls of wiring, an overhead rig

driving the panels back and forth. The presence of the artist in the work: a brief sequence shows Kentridge's fingers on the brush as it launches a flurry of ink and then retires from view. The reminder that a new work by Kentridge is always a retrospective: he likes to revisit the sites of earlier victories and re-enact them as if the outcome remains to be seen. There's also his democratic surrender of drawing, along with its fine-art credentials, to video animation as one element in a rich, mixed-media assembly. Finally there's the gag: the edgy sense of fun in Kentridge is never far from silent comedy, or the early talkie features, where disguise, desire and misunderstanding drive the laughs, along with the pathos. (Kentridge directed a production of *The Magic Flute* in 2005, but could just as well have done a *Marriage of Figaro* or *Così Fan Tutte*.) Animating physical objects is funny, and harder than making stop-motion sequences from great drawings. An artist who can bring two rectangles of wood to life as *dramatis personae* could probably animate the fine details of an insurance policy.

In *The Refusal of Time* (2012), a thirty-minute piece with music, 'soundscape' and a five-channel video projection, empire-era maps appear with the names of anti-colonial revolts flagged up: the Herero Wars in Namibia, for instance, and the Bambatha revolt in South Africa. Do we package these episodes simply by naming and dating them? The notion, for the purposes of this piece, is that they persist in non-chronological time – the kind Kentridge wants us to think about. *The Refusal of Time* was inspired, in part, by his discussions with Peter Galison, a Harvard physicist and historian of science. Galison wrote a witty, difficult text that accompanied the piece on its first outing in Kassel.² If you imagine time as a container ship of inconceivable dimensions filling up with endless cargo, you're roughly on the right track. Or, as the soundscape has it, 'a universal archive': an expanding hulk loaded with containerised traces of what we did, who we were, perhaps even what we thought, all of it destined to hang around as carbon dust or glowing embers, or minuscule slivers of ice, in a future without humans.

There is no progress in this model, but there can be forward movement, and circular repetition. In *The Refusal of Time* this is staged as a dance. At the Whitechapel, where I first saw it, a procession of the downtrodden was projected onto three walls of the gallery.³ The room was spacious and the cortège of silhouettes following itself around the walls, through a shadowy

Kentridge landscape reminiscent of the industrial sprawl beyond Johannesburg, achieved an impressive scale. Weary yet somehow rolling with the pace, these are the labouring poor, hewers of wood and drawers of water, adults and children carrying shovels, megaphones, odds and ends that might have been ripped from a miners' ablution block – old shower-heads, a tub – and arcane mechanical parts, suggesting bits of pithead gear. But why do we associate their wretchedness with the passion for counting and calibrating that drove the great advances of the industrial era? In a jokey reference to time-and-motion studies from the 1950s, two figures operating a handcar are also rotating the hands of an analogue clock. For all its drudgery, the procession is seditious, menacing, propelled by a wild music – part carnivalesque, part dirge (Philip Miller is the composer) – and by the moves of a jubilant dancer, in silhouette like the rest of the troupe.



From *The Refusal of Time*, 2012.

Elsewhere in the piece, we're asked to think about time as if it weren't something we experience. That's not easy: just as ideas about the materiality of the sign are mostly expressed in the medium they're investigating, Kentridge's exploration can only unfold in tick-tock time. But it's cleverly disruptive. In the overture, several giant metronomes are shown marking the same beat; when they kick out of sync, it's like a jolt to the body. Later we watch a filmed double-act starring two Kentridges: one

leaves the studio and the other remains behind. I'm unsure of my ground here, but the reference is surely to Einstein's famous twins, one of whom leaves for space and ages less rapidly than the other, who stays at home. In Galison's text, Einstein's scientific twin is Friedrich Adler, a close friend and, like Einstein, a disciple of Ernst Mach. We're left wondering whether Adler, who assassinated the Austrian minister-president Karl von Stürgkh in Vienna in 1916, aged more quickly during his brief jail term than Einstein, who was rocketing round the German science academies at the time.

In the middle of this immense mixed-media emporium at the Whitechapel was an imposing contraption, raising and lowering embossed cat flaps on wooden rods to the rhythmic sound of a bellows. It was billed as a 'breathing machine', but Kentridge and his collaborators call it 'the elephant'. Part of its purpose is to make us think about the role of monotony in the age of coal and steam, standardised measures of time, weight and distance, and the hunger for precision, which reaches a weird apogee, for Kentridge, with the Parisian fad for pneumatic timekeeping in the 1880s. But the contraption also reminds us of the human body measuring out its life by breaths (8 or 9 million every year): not the gusts of compressed air that drove the minute hands on thousands of Parisian clocks to the next graduation, but a single breath as a sign of life. We turn our gaze from the ungainly, puffing elephant to the energetic crowd processing along on the walls – tuba players, trombonists, figures with megaphones to their mouths – and realise, with a sigh of relief, that breath is also a precondition of music and speech.

Much of this is paradoxical, or would be if Kentridge were making a case in court, as his father did. In fact he is rearranging sets of ideas, often by intuition, like objects turned out of a box. The results are deeply satisfying, and he is always available to help us order our own thoughts. What he once said of animated film holds for the eclectic montages in this piece: they are 'a demonstration of how we make sense of the world, rather than an instruction about what the world means'.⁴ While his breathing machine toils on, heroically uninstructed, we have begun to grasp that we exist in a timescape where nothing is ever fully erased. The worldwide web is more than just an analogy; it's evidence that this vast repository of doings and sayings exists. On the soundtrack Kentridge wonders how to 'undo, unsay, unremember', make things 'unhappen' – a question, perhaps, about how to live with the endless dissemination of his thoughts – or anybody's – in the

chamber of everything. We hear his voice repeating: ‘Here I am’ – as if he longed to stay put and age normally, in a discrete space with walls, a floor and a ceiling.

This is impossible. The nearest he comes to it is the artist’s studio, the setting for nine short films made in 2003 – *Day for Night*, *Journey to the Moon* and *7 Fragments for Georges Méliès*. Shot on 16 mm and 35 mm film, edited as a digital transfer by his colleague Catherine Meyburgh, these fragments turn the studio into a magician’s den. Stop-motion and reverse-motion produce bizarre effects as Kentridge is shown drawing, erasing, reinscribing – sometimes a line inscribes or reinstates itself – on sheets of paper. A damaged life-size portrait is repaired and reassembled; writing is sucked off the page and into the nib of a pen; new work ingests earlier work, and everything is up for revision. Kentridge paces and gestures like a silent movie actor (Soviet cinema now, not Keystone studios); he returns to the desk and the artist’s materials perform at his bidding.

The great piece in this sequence is an off-piste remake of *Le Voyage dans la lune* (1902), George Méliès’s most famous film. In Kentridge’s version the artist is launched into space from his studio after converting his Italian stove-top coffee-maker into a rocket. On touchdown he gazes out at what might be a stretch of unreclaimable ground at the back of a mine dump in South Africa. Inside the little *macchinetta* spacecraft a nude figure – his wife – approaches him from behind and lays a hand on his back, as he gazes through the window. He reaches over his shoulder to put his hand on hers, but she’s gone. Outside, ragged, defiant figures make their way across the broken ground: the Wretched of the Moon.

In South Africa, mainstream opposition to apartheid took the form of class struggle, underwritten by race war, and Kentridge is fascinated both by the failures of the Russian Revolution and the successes of revolutionary avant-gardism in the arts. His dazzling eight-channel video collaboration with Miller and Meyburgh, *I Am Not Me, the Horse Is Not Mine* (2008), reimagines Stalin’s assault on Soviet modernism in the 1930s. A five-channel video installation (2015) uses a recording of a speech in French that Trotsky was rehearsing at the time of his exile in Turkey, film footage of Trotsky, a comic appearance by Kentridge as Trotsky, and a perplexing slapstick vignette which may or may not be a day in the life of his secretary, Evgenia Shelepina. The title, *O Sentimental Machine*, plays with the notion – here ascribed to Trotsky himself – that humans are ‘sentimental but

programmable machines', but it's soon apparent that the Shelepina figure is having trouble conforming to the programme. The waters of the Bosphorus seem to rise and subside around the figure of Trotsky in the film footage. Amid the mounting anarchy, his secretary does a semi-comic routine in front of a full-length mirror, reminding us that *Duck Soup* was released in the same year – 1933 – as the speech was being rehearsed. This is a frustrating piece, unfinished but hardly open-ended; it has an awkward surrealist manner, unusual in Kentridge, whose theatrical surprises and metamorphoses are closer to the older French tradition of *féerie*.⁵

Kentridge's pieces can achieve a reassuring lightness that was not always there in the earlier work. His run of animated films featuring Soho Eckstein, the South African capitalist, and Felix Teitelbaum, the marginal fatalist, made in the closing stages of apartheid, caught the sombre mood of the times. The draughtsmanship invited comparisons with Goya and – more to the point – Käthe Kollwitz: exhausted labourers, workforce dormitories, the rockface and the sparkling drill bit.⁶ Eckstein's own surroundings were full of sinister analogue clutter: mechanical cash registers and handset phones that morphed into cats. On his breakfast tray in his office in *Mine* (1991) there's a demonic cafetière. When he pushes down the plunger it goes clean through the pot, the building, the ground, boring deep into the underworld populated by his workers. But there were little feats of reclamation in these sooty, militant films. In *Felix in Exile* (1994), Kentridge handles the victims of the township wars, fought in the run-up to Mandela's victory at the polls, with ritual care. The fresh body on the ground whose head the family has just covered with a newspaper is a typical sight to be unremembered: I was working in the townships at the time. But the unsentimental kindness of the artist's eye, as he mourns the dead, feels to me now like a prompt to forget.



Sequence from *Mine*, 1991.

Kentridge's reclamation work goes on. In *Accounts and Drawings from Underground*, a collaboration with the anthropologist Rosalind Morris, he has drawn forty landscapes – charcoal with ink and what looks like gouache – on the pages of an accounts register kept by the East Rand Proprietary Mines Company in 1906.⁷ We see a stretch of ground changing subtly or suddenly as if we were observing different states of a painting. The sequence is preoccupied chiefly with these local changes, wrought by money and extractive industry; only near the end does the curve of the earth appear, as a warning about environmental degradation. *Accounts and Drawings* is one of Kentridge's many small-scale virtuoso achievements. So too is *Second-Hand Reading* (2013), a flipbook drawn on the pages of a *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*. A hint of the landscapes in *Accounts and Drawings* can be found here, along with free-standing studies: a bird, a singleton tree, the artist himself and his long-suffering Sancho Panza – the stove-top coffee-maker.

Archive Science: John Akomfrah

Between them, France and Britain had more than 450 million imperial subjects at the start of the First World War. Germany, despite the geographical size of its African acquisitions, had fewer than 20 million. All three empires threw colonial manpower into the conflict, in Africa, Anatolia, the Middle East and Europe. In Britain, as in Germany, there was strong resistance to the idea of African contingents bearing arms on European soil. Churchill was enraged by what he saw as the stupidity of this position. He was not alone. Charles Darnley Stuart Stephens, who had served in the Lagos police and commanded a battalion of British Nigerians some forty years earlier, wrote in the *English Review* in 1916 recommending the deployment of armed African regiments. He favoured Nigerians for 'daredevil charges into German trenches' and Sudanese for their demeanour: 'big, lusty coal-black devils ... whose advent would not be regarded by the Boches as a pleasing omen of more to come of the same sort'.

By the turn of the century, as the historian David Olusoga explains, Britain had already sorted its Indian subjects into martial races (mostly hardy mountain types from the Punjab) and effeminate races (typically people of the plateau and the 'soporific' plain).⁸ This new declension of race theory was one of the consequences of the Indian Rebellion of 1857, which led to an overhaul of the Indian army and an ethnography to justify it. Similar ideas about vigorous and slovenly peoples caught on quickly in colonial Africa. Zulus were self-evidently 'martial', even though they loafed around with their cattle; Hausa and Fulani in Nigeria were, in the words of Stuart Stephens, 'bonny fechtors' (Scots terminology for capable fighters). But Churchill and his followers failed to win their case. Too many British top brass and war-gamers felt that an African infantryman was no match for the toy soldiers they had led to victory in the nursery, supervised by their nannies: Africans were sure to scurry from the Hun. There were also British humanitarians, Olusoga tells us, who worried about the fate of African conscripts in any struggle between white men in the unforgiving north. Above all there was the fear that racial hierarchies might be jeopardised in the colonies when the war ended. White South African settlers were adamant about this. It was madness, in their view, to train Africans in the use of firearms. Instead, the British threw Indian army

regiments into the fray on European fronts and used Black Africans as non-combatant labour.

France set aside its own misgivings about colonial troops: its population was lower than Germany's and its birth rate in decline. In the 1850s the French had put together the *tirailleurs sénégalais* as African auxiliaries, pretty much coerced into service under the French flag. The *tirailleurs* subdued large swathes of Africa and their numbers grew with each pacification campaign as the vanquished were recruited, especially in Madagascar and Morocco. The idea of turning them into a 'force noire' for the European theatre was first put forward by General Charles Mangin a few years before the outbreak of war. Like Stuart Stephens, Mangin had a fierce sense of 'les races guerrières', endless ranks of 'bonny fechtters' who would acquit themselves well.

About 140,000 *tirailleurs* fought in Europe and the Dardanelles, with similar numbers of North African soldiers and mixed colonial and metropolitan regiments (*zouaves* and others). In 1919 many African soldiers were transformed into honorary white personnel and sent east to harry the Bolsheviks. There is no consensus on French African casualties in Europe, though historians are now producing figures that average out at around 40,000. At least 6 million people of non-European origin – Indians, Arabs, Africans, West Indians, East and South-East Asians (and 200,000 African Americans after 1917) – served on or near the battle lines, in and beyond Europe, from Flanders to Damaraland in southern Africa, fetching, carrying and fighting, as the three major European powers mortgaged their empires on the Western Front. Germany was scandalised by the deployment of 'barbarians' in Europe, both at the time and later. When the Nazis occupied Paris in 1940, Hitler gave orders to destroy a statue of Mangin in the seventh *arrondissement*.

The Head& the Load, a 'processional opera' by William Kentridge, tells the story of African porters serving the Great Powers as they fought it out in their respective African colonies. In one episode, droves of porters help the British move gunboats overland from Cape Town to the shores of Lake Tanganyika for a naval confrontation with the Germans.⁹ (Germany's African colonies were seized at the Treaty of Versailles and became League of Nations mandates in 1920.) Africans requisitioned for Europe were not Kentridge's subject: the UK art-commissioning body for the First World War centenary gave that job to John Akomfrah, whose three-screen

installation, *Mimesis: African Soldier* was shown for the first time at the Imperial War Museum in London in 2018.

Akomfrah, born in Ghana in 1957, is rightly famous for his video/sound explorations of migration (including forced migrations), the European-African encounter and the invention of race. For a work about colonised peoples who toiled and died for their imperial masters in Europe – the reluctant, the enthusiastic and the quickly disabused – he was the obvious candidate. At seventy-five minutes, *Mimesis* is an angular, elliptical homage to these men, a fusion of highly wrought historical documentary and cryptic evocations of lived experience, using actors (always silent), archive film and photographs, ethnographic sound recordings, new filmed material – with and without the actors – and a soundtrack by the composer Trevor Mathison. This is vintage Akomfrah, building on the techniques that fascinated him in the 1980s as a founder member of the Black Audio Film Collective: quick changes in register; uninhibited longueurs; unsettling shifts from the brutal, self-explanatory quality of battle footage to a lustrous theatricality, as costumed actors wander through sets dressed with war paraphernalia or rehearse slow, understated farewells in African family compounds (shot in Kenya).

Akomfrah's archive sequences are interspersed with mysterious *natures mortes*, organised and lit with the care of a painter, sometimes disposed in the great outdoors as shimmering contradictions: still lifes in landscape. The bits and pieces he combines (a bugle, say, and an infantryman's shovel, or a framed photograph of an African veteran) are chosen with an eye for allegory. They might be set out on a stretch of coastline with a calm sea swell, or submerged in a stream where running water agitates their shapes. They test our nerve and try our patience, but just as we begin to worry that an emblematic tableau is about to break the restless grandeur of the piece as a whole, we're pulled back into gripping archive footage: Black stevedores in Europe, for instance, unloading colonial produce, which has followed in their wake and will now make its way, on the back of their labour, to the front lines.

Mimesis combines the skills of a pioneering documentary maker, a tenacious archive researcher and an avant-garde auteur with those of the wardrobe stylist: *Mimesis* is not Akomfrah's only work to go to town on period costume (in this case the uniforms of African soldiers). *Tropikos* (2014), in which Africans and Europeans explore the nature of the Other, is

set in the sixteenth century; *Auto da Fé* (2016) reflects on migration and religious persecution across four centuries. Embroidered tunics, tricorne hats and cotton bonnets have an elaborate place in these stylised reconstructions. Anachronistic, modern-day outfits might have collapsed the distance between then and now, but this isn't Akomfrah's priority. His use of wardrobe in *Mimesis* and other pieces allows us to think about the appeal of TV period drama. Wardrobe semaphore fascinates Akomfrah, but he wants to complicate the signals, using costume as a way of asking what we think we're up to when we conspire in elegant descriptions of the past. In *Mimesis*, colonial uniforms are all the more striking for being set beside the grainy overcoats and khakis of the soldiers in his archive material. This historical footage is sometimes slowed down, tinted or restored, but it never puts colour back into the cheeks of the dead: Peter Jackson's dazzling transformation of monochrome archive in *They Shall Not Grow Old* could not be further from Akomfrah's mind.¹⁰ His actors warn us that remembrance comes in many guises, some of them unreliable. (He hints, too, at the allure of parade uniforms, which may have been a source of pride to new regulars before they exchanged them for combat dress.)



From *Mimesis*, 2018.

The silent characters in *Mimesis* are nearly always distanced, and intent on laying their operations bare (I am an actor, that is a camera). Yet once we're allowed to observe their faces at close quarters they exercise a

magnetic pull on our sympathy. These animated masks, beautifully directed and shot, are at their most compelling when they are motionless, almost transparent, their eyes like windows onto darkened rooms. *Psyche* (2012), Akomfrah's nine-minute homage to his cinematic influences, includes classic close-ups of civilians on the Odessa steps from Eisentein's *Battleship Potemkin* and the face of Renée Jeanne Falconetti in Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc*. 'From the face,' one of the epigraphs in *Psyche* reads, 'will come the truth of the event.' But because the haunting portraits in *Mimesis* are always of colonial subjects, the 'truth' of the war seems to mutate under their gaze and confront us with new questions. What did it mean to serve in a distant conflict between rival European masters? Or to come away, if you lived through it, knowing the superior race could die in large numbers? What account would survivors take back to their families in the outposts of exhausted empires? What does the war have to say to modern minorities? Akomfrah's actors – mostly under fifty, all Black – have a keen eye on the present, and anti-immigration policy in the Global North, with its drastic rearguard actions against people from the Caribbean who settled in the UK midway through the last century.

Akomfrah likes to get to grips with 'archive science', as the credits in his pieces refer to it. He and his fellow researchers at Smoking Dogs, his production company, talk of getting the archive to 'fess up', encouraging it to speak intelligibly and reveal secrets it didn't know it was keeping. Once the archive is forced to confess in analogue, Akomfrah's team comes forward with a rich digital summary of its findings. *Mimesis* includes rare footage of colonial recruits waiting to be issued with uniforms, colonial workers felling a birch forest, and multiple scenes of non-whites off duty – dancing, singing and playing instruments. The archive, it turns out, offers a reassuring abundance of happy colonials – African, Vietnamese, Chinese, Sikh – given to the simple pleasures of the backward races. Imitation, as the title of the piece suggests, is the key both to mastery and misunderstanding. The behaviour of non-whites at the front makes sense only when they mimic a set of platitudes cherished by whites. For all races, soldiering is founded on imitation ('do as I do') and obedience ('do as I say'), but when Akomfrah's characters repeatedly salute the camera, their gaze is blank; we sense a mixture of fatigue and insubordination – and the stirrings of anti-colonial sentiment – in these impersonations of respect (Kentridge's performers have a similar routine, with their faltering attempts to salute in

The Head and the Load). More broadly, in Akomfrah's view, the commemoration of war is always mimetic, as one anniversary sets a benchmark for the next. *Mimesis* itself, he has said, is an 'imitation of history'.

In *Vertigo Sea*, another of Akomfrah's three-screen installations, imitation is a device rather than a theme.¹¹ The piece draws liberally on the BBC Natural History Unit's film archive, marine life especially, and matches it with original filmed sequences shot by the South African cinematographer Dewald Aukema, Akomfrah's other pair of eyes. Images of the living world cascade towards us; without the mediating voice of a BBC presenter, nature appears to be speaking for itself in long, ecstatic bursts. But we soon discover that the animal archive has been misappropriated (wonderfully, to my mind), and we're thinking about human migration, mass uprooting and resettlement; race, difference and assimilation; the threat posed by *Homo sapiens* to itself and other species. The soundtrack – with music by Mathison and recorded voices weaving in and out – introduces a niggling human presence into the BBC's charismatic underwater sequences and its dubious stagings of wilderness.

The frenzy of archive material is punctuated by still lifes: sextants, clocks, upturned chairs and assorted flotsam arranged on patches of rocky shoreline (Aukema again). Actors appear at intervals, often as melancholic characters gazing out to sea. Akomfrah is fascinated by the *Rückenfigur*, the emblematic figure who faces away from us, wrestling with preoccupations that we, too, must try to make sense of.¹² Discovery, we come to understand, was not a uniquely European ambition: Africans have always been intrigued by worlds beyond their own continent. The lighthouse, a recurring image in *Vertigo Sea*, reminds us of the mariner's return, and the modern migrant's sighting of the promised land. But we also encounter humans in the thick of things, a long way from home, churned around within the natural order. Analogue documentary footage shows men shooting polar bears on the ice and butchering whales. Newsreel of a burning offshore oil rig evokes 'The Try-Works', a prophetic chapter in *Moby-Dick* in which the furnaces are stoked on the deck of the *Pequod* and the catch is rendered for human consumption: the ship becomes a reeking industrial works in the middle of a pristine ocean.

Akomfrah's humans are no less ruthless in the pursuit of their own kind than they are in the predation of other species. In a brief, powerful

reconstruction of the Middle Passage, slaves are tossed into the Atlantic. We see sketchy archive footage of Argentina under the junta in the 1970s: an airborne helicopter reminds us that detainees were flown out beyond the coast and thrown into the same ocean. In a few seconds of audio, we hear an officer giving orders for a round-up in ‘the casbah’: we’re in North Africa in 1957, as French paramilitaries prosecute the Battle of Algiers. These ferocious struggles, in which humans turn on one another and the rest of nature, are glossed by readings from Herman Melville, Friedrich Nietzsche, Virginia Woolf, Derek Walcott (‘then came the men with eyes heavy as anchors’) and Heathcote Williams (*Whale Nation*).¹³ The spoken texts play in and out of the deafening audio mix as whales breach, icecaps melt, huge shoals of fish migrate from screen to screen and thick flocks of birds fly low over the sea, which darkens under their shadows.

The stakes are high, not just because of the pace and frequency with which human activity is assimilated to the non-human, but because the result is totalising: the montage achieves an uncanny homogeneity, as if the piece were made in a single medium, like a cast-metal sculpture or a totemic object hewn from a tree. There are moments when it seems to have been conjured entirely, exquisitely from water. *Vertigo Sea* has the unity, and the vulgarity, of a creation myth, though we also read it as an epic story of annihilation and loss. Akomfrah has always been happy with the idea of art as ‘threnody’ (his word), and it’s not a great step from lamentation to an appreciation of beauty in death and destruction. The question is whether we’re prepared to go along with him. I find I am – perhaps to the ends of the earth, and as far as we can tell, that’s where he wants to take us.



From *Tropikos*.

Postscript: Venice 2024

However remote the world Akomfrah has in mind, we are never far from the millions of men and women whose destiny was to disperse beyond the African continent. And we cannot leave the colonial past impacted in time, even though formal British rule ended in Ghana, Akomfrah's country of origin, halfway through the last century.

Listening All Night to the Rain followed hard on the heels of *Arcadia* – a meditation on European penetration in the Americas – and prolonged Akomfrah's curiosity about vast distances travelled by human beings and other species.¹⁴ Roughly ten years had elapsed since *Vertigo Sea*, which left us to contemplate the rage of oceanic wilderness. *Listening All Night to the Rain*, an ambitious multiscreen installation, is equally restless, full of new destinations and old shores revisited. Yet it hints less of exploration than of gathering and recollection, as if the time had come to take stock and guide the imagination back to port, even to a kind of domesticity. We're nonetheless warned against the solace of home by the title of the piece, borrowed from the eleventh-century Chinese poet Su Dongpo, who spent years in political exile.¹⁵

In *Listening All Night to the Rain*, Akomfrah's berth – the not-quite-home to which the wandering imagination might return – is Britain: a zone of settlement for migrants from the Commonwealth. His archive material depicts Britain as exotic, even exhilarating, although it asks stoicism of migrants and their children as they encounter one setback after another on the road to assimilation. This is especially true once the rules of hospitality are at last made explicit, as they were in Theresa May's 'hostile environment' speech in 2012 and the witch hunt for potential 'illegals' that gave rise to the *Windrush* scandal six years later. The 'rain' in Akomfrah's title might almost be an ambient feature of the little offshore host country where leaden skies conspire with the incivility that greeted generations of migrants. The words 'No Irish, No Blacks, No Dogs' appear on several screens in the piece.

It consists of eight 'cantos'. The allusion is to Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, a long 'poem including history'. The soundtrack is an eclectic mix put together with the US ethnomusicologist Steven Feld, along with fragments of song that are instantly recognisable (for instance, Billie Holiday

performing ‘Gloomy Sunday’). When the installation premiered in Venice, each canto had its own discrete space. Canto Six, in a large room with eight wide screens, is grounded in Britain, as a kind of national story, and then migrates west as stills appear of African Americans speaking into the handsets of Bakelite phones: James Baldwin, Coretta King, Malcolm X. Dewald Aukema’s superb, melancholic still lifes of analogue devices (transistor radios, tape recorders, vinyl turntables) are scattered throughout the piece. Canto Six also contains archive footage of mass detentions by the British in Kenya during the Mau Mau Uprising, protest marches in the West against the overthrow of Lumumba and his humiliation in the run-up to his murder. Later come desolate images from the Biafran War.

Why do these scenes stand out from Akomfrah’s kaleidoscopic mix of minute detail and visionary world-historical patterns? Partly because they are fixed starkly at points in time and, unlike much of the archive material, they’re not easily prised away and allowed to resolve in the shimmering spaces of the piece, where dates and tenses can often elude us. Akomfrah has said that he wants ‘people who are interested in the drama of the colonial adventure to realise that not all of it is entirely the responsibility of human beings’ (as an example he cites ‘the enabling agency of wind’ as a propitious factor for early Iberian navigators).¹⁶ Yet the footage from Kenya – and from Congo within a year of decolonisation – leaves us thinking that human intrigue lies at the heart of colonial turmoil and shapes the postcolonial order. This was the case in Ghana, where Nkrumah was deposed in 1966. Akomfrah’s father, a loyal presidential ally, was killed in the run-up to the coup. The young Akomfrah and his mother were forced to flee and eventually ended up in Britain. If he had wanted to offer straightforward narratives of upheaval – colonial meddling in Africa, say, or forced migration – he would have been well placed to do so. Instead, he prefers juxtaposition, the tidal pull of analogy and hidden affinities – anything that calls our ways of seeing and understanding into question.

But what is it to understand his opaque pieces in the first place? In 2024 he expressed an interest in the under-explored role of affect in our institutions (markets, banking, diplomacy, governance) – arrangements we think of as more or less rational, despite our misgivings. Above all, though, it’s this obscure play of affect in ourselves that he wants us to acknowledge. As we study his lingering video portraits of near-motionless human subjects in *Listening All Night to the Rain*, we notice simply that they blink and

breathe. At the same time we experience a larger coming and going between ourselves and his sitters, not unlike the swell of the sea on his tranquil shorelines, where the *Rückenfigur* gazes into the distance. In these complex transactions of thought and feeling, we have an intimation that we're being observed not just by Akomfrah's impassive sitters, but by ourselves, at a remove from our own looking. And so there are two figures to contend with: the sitter and the me-as-looker, whom we sense as a new player in the piece, with its back towards us.

Akomfrah's work is full of enigmas, doublings and redoublings. Sometimes there is too much to process. But maybe, as he hints, we have to trawl our own 'affective economies' for clues about how we attend to his. It's no use thinking we can simply *watch* a video portrait in *Listening to the Rain* any more than we can *visit* the installation itself. The way to avoid feeling overwhelmed, perhaps, is to acknowledge our own innerwhelming, a strange turbulence in our apprehension of the world and the image. The piece allows us plenty of scope to conduct that experiment while Akomfrah's metronomes – a favourite motif, as it is for Kentridge – mark time in an elastic present, saturated with the past. A small ad in a pre-Civil War newspaper offers a bounty for the capture of a runaway slave. A fishing boat lists in a violent storm. John Everett Millais's Ophelia is serenely drowned. A plastic bag drifts beneath the surface of the sea: a new marine species for the Anthropocene. British colonial militias are rounding up suspected rebels in Kenya. Rhodes must fall.

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pp. 173 and 177: William Kentridge studio, with thanks to Grace O'Malley at Goodman Gallery.

pp. 182 and 186: Smoking Dogs Films.

Notes

Introduction

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1. Report from Sirius B

- [1](#) Michel Leiris, *L'Âge d'homme*, Gallimard, 1939, trans. Richard Howard as *Manhood*, Jonathan Cape, 1963.
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- [8](#) *Dieu d'eau* (Du Chêne, 1948) was translated into English by Ralph Butler as *Conversations with Ogotemmêli: An Introduction to Dogon Religious Ideas*, International African Institute, 1963; a revised translation by Audrey Richards and Beatrice Hooke was published by Oxford University Press, 1965.
- [9](#) Michel Leiris, *La Langue secrète des Dogon de Sanga (Soudan français)*, Institut d'ethnologie, 1948.
- [10](#) *Funérailles dogon du professeur Marcel Griaule*, 1956, in *Jean Rouch: Une aventure africaine*, DVD box set, Editions Montparnasse, 2010.
- [11](#) *Le Renard pâle*, Institut d'ethnologie, 1965, trans. Stephen C. Infantino as *The Pale Fox*, Continuum, 1986.
- [12](#) Mary Douglas, 'If the Dogon ...', *Cahiers d'études africaines* 7, no. 28, 1967.
- [13](#) Walter van Beek, 'Dogon Restudied: A Field Evaluation of the Work of Marcel Griaule', *Current Anthropology* 32, no. 2, 1991.
- [14](#) René Vautier, *Afrique 50*, Ligue de l'enseignement, 1950. Banned by the French censor for forty years, the film is available online at Tënk.
- [15](#) 'Manifeste des 121' was published in September 1960 in the short-lived journal *Vérité-Liberté* (1960–62). It was primarily a defence of French pro-FLN activists against prosecution and

signed for the most part by white, left-leaning notables, including Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, Marguerite Duras, Nathalie Sarraute and Pierre Boulez. Edouard Glissant is the only signatory whose later reputation as a literary critic, poet and philosopher indicates the extent of black solidarity with French activists and the Algerian struggle itself. The original ‘Manifeste des 121’ in French is available online, and a rough translation in English can be found at the Marxists Internet Archive.

2. A Visitor’s Guide to Three Museums

- [1](#) *You Hide Me*, a short polemical documentary by Nii Kwate Owoo, shot in the reserves of the British Museum, UK/Ghana, 1970 (17 mins).
- [2](#) The Museum of Mankind in Burlington Gardens housed the British Museum’s Department of Ethnography for most of the 1990s and closed in 1997. Its contents were redistributed around the Bloomsbury site. The move involved the creation of a Department of Africa, Oceania and the Americas, and a new Asia Department (formerly Oriental Antiquities). The Sainsbury Galleries opened to the public in 2001.
- [3](#) *Africa: Art of a Continent*, August 1995 to January 1996.
- [4](#) *Africa: Arts and Culture*, British Museum Press, 2000.
- [5](#) ‘Fantasy coffins’ are a speciality of Teshie, part of the Greater Accra region in Ghana. Paa Willie died c. 2009. Paa Joe, aka Joseph Tetteh-Ashong, was born in the mid-1940s. Both were apprenticed to Seth Kane Kwei (c. 1922–1992), the virtuoso of the modern fantasy coffin.
- [6](#) ‘Chiffres clés’, Musée du Quai Branly Jacques Chirac, 2024.
- [7](#) Kerchache (1941–2002) made his reputation as a dealer in First People’s arts and artefacts.
- [8](#) The comparison was made by Neil MacGregor, director of the British Museum at the time.
- [9](#) *Année Sociologique*, a journal that continues to this day, was founded by Durkheim in 1898.
- [10](#) Anatole Lewitsky, a specialist in Siberian shamanism and head of the European-Asiatic department; and Boris Vildé, responsible for the study of ‘Peuples polaires’ or peoples of the Arctic. Both were Russian émigrés.
- [11](#) D’un regard l’Autre, Quai Branly, September 2006 to January 2007.
- [12](#) Neal Ascherson, *The King Incorporated*, Allen& Unwin, 1963, Granta, 1999.
- [13](#) Hannelore Vandenberg, ‘A New Perspective on the Hutereau Collection’, AfricaMuseum website.
- [14](#) Lies Busselen, ‘Déterrer le passé: les traces des ancêtres à Feshi’, *(Re)Making Collections: Origins, Trajectories& Reconnections*, ed. Sarah Van Beurden, Didier Gondola and Agnès Lacaille, Royal Museum for Central Africa, 2023.
- [15](#) Vicky Van Bockhaven, ‘Leopard-men Objects: On the Materiality of Colonial Oppression’; Busselen, ‘Déterrer le passé’.
- [16](#) Hochschild, Mariner Books, 1998; De Witte, Uitgeverij van Halewyck, 1999, Verso, 2001, trans. Ann Wright and Renée Fenby. For an account of *Exit Congo Museum*, see Raymond Corbey, *Anthropology Today* 17, no. 3, June 2001.
- [17](#) Christophe Boltanski, *King Kasai*, Stock, 2023.
- [18](#) Sarr and Savoy, *Rapport sur la restitution du patrimoine culturel africain*, Présidence de la République, 2018.
- [19](#) Mati Diop, *Dahomey*, Les Films du Bal, Fanta Sy/Losange, 2024 (1 hr, 8 mins).
- [20](#) David Abulafia, ‘Is the tide turning against restitution?’, *The Spectator*, 20 February 2025.
- [21](#) Sarah Schug, ‘The Politics of Looted African Art: Decolonising Europe’s Museums’, *The Parliament Magazine*, 19 February 2024.

- [22](#) Liz Catalano, 'Benin Bronzes and the Auction World', *Auction Daily*, 26 April 2021.
- [23](#) Gracia Lwanzo Kasongo, 'Symposium on Confronting Colonial Objects', *Opinio Juris*, 18 April 2024.

3. This Site Is Under Reconstruction

- [1](#) At the time, Algeria was regarded as part of France and divided into three administrative departments.
- [2](#) These articles can be found in André Abbou and Jacqueline Lévi-Valensi (eds), *Cahiers Albert Camus, 3: Fragments d'un combat 1938–1940*, Gallimard, 1978. Other works by Camus referred to in this piece are collected in La Pléiade, *Oeuvres complètes*, Gallimard, 2006 and 2008.
- [3](#) *Algerian Chronicles*, Harvard, 2013.
- [4](#) *Humanisme et terreur, essai sur le problème communiste*, Gallimard 1948, translated by John O'Neill, Beacon Press, 1969 and 1990.
- [5](#) Jeanson, 'Albert Camus ou l'âme révoltée', *Les Temps Modernes* 79, May 1952; Camus's reply to Jeanson appeared in the August issue, no. 82, along with Sartre's withering response. Beauvoir's *Les Mandarins* was published by Gallimard in 1954.
- [6](#) *La Question* was translated into English and published by John Calder, 1958, and republished by Nebraska, 2006.
- [7](#) The poverty of many *pieds noirs* in Algeria was mirrored in Portugal's settler-colonies, to which large numbers of the country's indigent peasantry were dispatched in the 1940s through the 1960s with help from the metropole. See [Chapter 4](#), 'Mangy-Dog in Mozambique'.
- [8](#) Conor Cruise O'Brien, *Camus*, Fontana Modern Masters (Collins), 1970.
- [9](#) The failed assassination attempt took place at Le Petit-Clamart in the Parisian *banlieue* in 1962. The mayor of Aix-en-Provence at the time of the Camus controversy in 2012 was Maryse Joissains-Masini, a former member of the Young Communist Movement who had swung to the right.
- [10](#) Benjamin Stora with Jean-Baptiste Périet, *Camus Brûlant*, Stock, 2013.
- [11](#) Kamel Daoud, *Meursault, contre-enquête*, Editions Barzakh, 2013, and Actes Sud, 2014, translated by Jonathan Cullen as *The Meursault Investigation*, Oneworld, 2015.
- [12](#) The opening lines of *L'Étranger* in English are from Sandra Smith's translation, *The Outsider*, Penguin, 2013. Those of *Meursault, contre-enquête* are from Cullen's.
- [13](#) Michel Tournier, *Vendredi ou les Limbes du Pacifique*, Gallimard, 1967; translated by Norman Denny as *Friday or the Other Island*, Penguin, 1974.
- [14](#) Kamel Daoud, 'Cologne: lieux des fantasmes', *Le Monde*, 29 January 2016.
- [15](#) 'L'Erreur du "cheikh" Mélenchon', *Le Point*, 20 November 2023; 'Malika Sorel, Rima Hassan et le sujet caché', *Le Point*, 8 April 2024. See also Faris Lounis, 'La Fascination de Kamel Daoud pour l'extrême droite', *Orient XXI*, 4 September 2024.

4. Mangy-Dog in Mozambique

- [1](#) Translated by Dorothy Guedes, Heinemann, 1969.

- 2 Raúl Bernado Manuel Honwana, *Histórias ouvidas e vividas dos homens e da terra: memórias e notas autobiográficas*, Sociedade moçambicana dos serviços, 1985. For a summary in English, see Allen F. Isaacman, 'The Life History of Raúl Honwana: An Inside View of Mozambique from Colonialism to Independence, 1905–1975', *Cahiers d'études africaines*, EHESS 28, no. 109, 1988.
- 3 Gilberto Freyre, *Casa Grande e Senzala*, Livraria José Olympio Editora, 1933; translated by Samuel Putnam as *The Masters and the Slaves: A Study in the Development of Brazilian Civilisation*, Knopf, 1946.
- 4 A rare exception was Léopold Senghor, a founder of the Négritude movement in the 1930s. On the objections of Mário Pinto de Andrade and other anti-colonial sceptics, see Alexandra Reza, *Anti-Colonial Form: Literary Journals at the End of Empire*, Oxford University Press, 2024; for a postcolonial novelist's critique of lusotropicalism, see Alexandra Reza, 'If Only We Were Transparent', *London Review of Books* 45, no. 10, 18 May 2023 (on Lídia Jorge's *The Wind Whistling in the Cranes*).
- 5 Franco Nogueira, *The Third World*, Johnson, 1967, quoted by Basil Davidson in his introduction to Eduardo de Sousa Ferreira, *Portuguese Colonialism in Africa: the End of an Era*, UNESCO Press, 1974.
- 6 Figures for 1950 are from James Duffey, 'Portuguese Africa (Angola and Mozambique): Some Crucial Problems and the Role of Education in their Resolution', *The Journal of Negro Education* 30, no. 3, 1961.
- 7 *Nós Matámos o Cão Tinhoso*, Sociedade de Imprensa de Moçambique, 1964.
- 8 For the sketchy details of Bertina's life and reproductions of works mentioned in this piece, see Claudio Crescenti, *Bertina Lopes: Tutto (o quasi)*, Palombi Editori, 2013; *Bertina Lopes: Catalogue*, with an essay by Mary Angela Schroth, Richard Saltoun, 2022; Nancy Dantas, 'Bertina Lopes: A Militant with a Brush', *Revista de Comunicação e Linguagens* 54, 2021.
- 9 For a résumé of the interface between 'modernity' (including modernism) and African tradition, see Paul Gilroy's reflections on *Présence Africaine* in 'Living Memory and the Slave Sublime', *The Black Atlantic*, Verso, 1993, republished 2022.
- 10 Translated by Stephen Gray with Luís Rafael in *Stained Glass: Poetry from the Land of Mozambique*, Roman Books, 2011.
- 11 Luís Bernardo Honwana, *Viva Pancho!*, ed. Lonka and Pedro Guedes, Total Cad Academy, 2003. On Pancho Guedes and patronage, see Alexandre Pomar, 'In Search of New African Art in the 1960s. Sponsorship and Training in the Decade of Euphoria – Ulli Beier, Pancho Guedes and Julian Beinart', Buala, 2010, buala.org.
- 12 Honwana, 'Rosita, Until Death', in Stephen Gray (ed.), *The Picador Book of African Stories*, 2000; *A Vêha Casa de Madeira e Zinco*, Alcance Editores (Maputo).

5. 'Women Who Struggle'

- 1 José Luandino Vieira, 'O fato completo de Lucas Matesso', *Vidas novas*, Afrontamento, 1975.
- 2 Marguerite Duras, 'La Reine des nègres vous parle des blancs', *France Observateur*, 20 February 1958.
- 3 A widely repeated quotation, in various English translations, which first appeared in 'To Make a Film Means to Take a Position', in Karyn Kay and Gerald Peary (eds), *Women and the Cinema, A Critical Anthology*, E. H. Dutton, 1977.
- 4 Sylvie Chalaye, 'La Compagnie des Griots ou l'ambition d'un "véritable théâtre noire moderne"', *Africultures* 92–3, 2013.

- [5](#) René Hénane, *Césaire et Lautreámont, béstiaire et métamorphose*, L'Harmattan, 2006.
- [6](#) For more on *Présence Africaine*, see Ferroudja Allouache, 'Naissance et résistance d'une revue: *Présence Africaine*', *Continents manuscrits*, no. 9, 2017.
- [7](#) The revised edition of Césaire's poem was published by *Présence Africaine* in 1959 and discussed by Musab Younis in 'The Mouth of Calamities', *London Review of Books* 46, no. 23, 5 December 2024; Andrade's *La Poésie africaine d'expression portugaise* was published by Pierre Jean Oswald in 1969.
- [8](#) Duras, 'La Reine des nègres vous parle des blancs'.
- [9](#) Bertrand Poirot-Delpêche, '"Les Nègres" de Jean Genet', *Le Monde*, 4 November 1959.
- [10](#) Jeremy Harding, 'You're with Your King', *London Review of Books* 44, no. 3, 10 February 2022.
- [11](#) Edgar Morin and Jean Rouch, *Chronique d'un été*, Argos, 1961.
- [12](#) William Klein, *Festival pan-africain d'Alger 1969*, Office Nationale pour le commerce et l'industrie cinématographiques (ONCIC), Algiers, 1969.
- [13](#) Document archived by Annouchka de Andrade.
- [14](#) 'Transmission en "Sol Majeure" entre grande-mères et petites filles', RFI, 19 December 2019.
- [15](#) José Luandino Vieira, *The Real Life of Domingos Xavier*, trans. Michael Wolfers, Heinemann African Writers Series, 1978.
- [16](#) 'Third World Perspectives: Focus on Sarah Maldoror', *Women& Film* 1, nos 5–6. *Women& Film* was a short-lived publication (c. 1972–75), edited by Siew-Hwa Beh and Saunie Salyer, available online, introduced by Clarissa Jacob, at Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media.
- [17](#) Monique Hennebelle, 'Sambizanga: Ein Interview mit Sarah Maldoror aus dem Jahr 1973', *Afrikanisches Kino*, 1997, cited in Maja Figge, 'Towards a Caring Gaze: Aesthetics of Decolonisation in Sarah Maldoror's *Sambizanga*', *Revista de comunicação e linguagens*, no. 54, June 2021.
- [18](#) Document archived by Annouchka de Andrade.
- [19](#) *Eia pour Césaire*, L'Institut de l'audiovisuel, 2009.
- [20](#) Document archived by Annouchka de Andrade.

6. The West African Photographer's Studio

- [1](#) Zoë Strother: 'A Photograph Steals the Soul', in John Peffer and Elisabeth Cameron (eds), *Portraiture and Photography in Africa*, Indiana University Press, 2013. Another early itinerant photographer of the day was the Nigerian aristocrat Chief Solomon Osagie Alonge (1911–1994), until he became the court photographer of the royal family of Benin. He went on to set up Ideal Photo Studio in Benin City in 1942 (*Chief S. O. Alonge: Photographer to the Royal Court of Benin, Nigeria*, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian, September 2014–July 2016).
- [2](#) See *Anthologie de la photographie africaine et de l'Océan indienne*, Revue Noire, 1998, which helped Seydou Keïta's international reputation on its way.
- [3](#) *Liverpool through the Lens*, National Trust Books, 2007.
- [4](#) *Seydou Keïta: Catalogue d'exposition*, Galeries nationales du Grand Palais, March–July 2016, new edn 2022.
- [5](#) Header quotation for 'Vintages, 1952–1955', *Seydou Keïta: Catalogue d'exposition*.
- [6](#) Yves Aupetitallot, 'Seydou Keïta vers la modernité coloniale', *Seydou Keïta: Catalogue d'exposition*.
- [7](#) Amy Sall, *The African Gaze, Photography, Cinema and Power*, Thames& Hudson, 2024.
- [8](#) 'Entretien avec André Magnin', *Seydou Keïta: Catalogue d'exposition*.

- [9](#) Many African photographers could make the same claim or stake another on the historical value of their work, including originators from former British colonies. See, for example, *James Barnor, Accra-London, A Retrospective*, Koenig Books/Serpentine Galleries, 2021; *A World in Common: Contemporary African Photography*, Tate, 2023.
- [10](#) *Autophoto*, Cartier Foundation, 2017; *Volta Photo: Starring Sanlé Sory and the People of Bobo-Dioulasso in the Small but Mighty Musical Country of Burkina Faso*, Art Institute of Chicago, 2018.
- [11](#) *Sory Sanlé Volta Photo*, Steidl/Art Institute of Chicago, 2018.
- [12](#) See, for example, Jean-Bernard Ouédraogo, 'La Figuration photographique des identités sociales: valeurs et apparences au Burkina Faso', *Cahiers d'études africaines* 36, nos 141–2, 1996.
- [13](#) The Sapeurs took their name from an association formed in Congo-Brazzaville, perhaps as early as the 1920s: La Société d'ambianceurs et des personnes élégantes (La SAPE). Unlike Sory's younger clients, Sapeurs dressed to the nines as urban swells, with a preference for lavish suits with collar-and-tie, the more expensive the better. Mimetic insolence vis-à-vis the colonial powers was part of the intention. Many of Sory's sitters were drawn to the *de rigueur* informal 1960s styles percolating from the US and Britain via Europe, which anticipated Hollywood's Blaxploitation movies and harked back to 'yéyé', a West African shorthand for the early Beatles sound: 'She loves you, yeah, yeah, yeah'.
- [14](#) Florent Mazzoleni, *Burkina Faso: Musiques modernes voltaïques*, Castor Astrale, 2011.

7. Apartheid in Monochrome

- [1](#) Charles van Onselen, *Studies in the Social and Economic History of the Witwatersrand 1886–1914*, vol. 2, *New Nineveh*, Longman, 1982.
- [2](#) David Goldblatt, *Structures of Dominion and Democracy*, ed. Karolina Ziebinska-Lewandowska, Steidl, 2018.
- [3](#) For this and other quotations, *ibid.*
- [4](#) Nadine Gordimer, 'The Witwatersrand: A Time and Tailings', *Optima* 18, no. 1, March 1968. Revised for David Goldblatt and Nadine Gordimer, *On the Mines*, C. Struick, 1973.
- [5](#) David Goldblatt, *Some Afrikaners Photographed*, Murray Crawford, 1975, and Steidl, 2019. See also Lesley Lawson, *David Goldblatt*, Phaidon, 2001.
- [6](#) Charles van Onselen, *The Seed Is Mine: The Life of Kas Maine, a South African Sharecropper, 1894–1985*, James Currey, 1996.
- [7](#) Lewis Nkosi, 'Black Power or Souls of Black Writers', *Home and Exile*, Longman, 1965.
- [8](#) François Kollar's photos of people at work were gathered in two volumes as *La France travaille*, Horizons de France, 1932–34; republished by Editions du Chêne, 1986. This photo was taken in 1931 in the Piscine des Mines de Sarre et Moselle. It has been widely misunderstood as a recreational idyll.
- [9](#) Ernest Cole (with Thomas Flaherty), *House of Bondage*, Random House, 1967; expanded edition with essays by Mongane Wole Serote, Oluremi C. Onabanjo and James Sanders, Aperture, 2022.
- [10](#) See Marie Meyerding, 'Africa's First Woman Press Photographer: Mabel Cetu's Photographs in *Zonk!*', *African Arts* 55, no. 3, 2021; Ethel-Ruth Tawe, 'Mabel Cetu: a Complicated Legacy', *Contemporary And*, January 2024.
- [11](#) This and other quotations are taken from the 2022 edition of *House of Bondage*.
- [12](#) Pierre Bourdieu, *Picturing Algeria*, Columbia University Press, 2012.

- [13](#) James Sanders, *House of Bondage*.
- [14](#) Ibid.
- [15](#) Tom Hopkinson, *In the Fiery Continent*, Victor Gollancz, 1962.
- [16](#) Peter Magubane, an assiduous rival and brilliant photographer, took a similar shot to Cole's of miners' medicals: 'Mine recruits humiliated by being forced to strip naked for tuberculosis examination' (1968), A4 Arts Foundation, Cape Town, undated.
- [17](#) Joseph Lelyveld, *Move your Shadow: South Africa, Black and White*, Time Books, 1985.
- [18](#) Henri Cartier-Bresson, *Images à la sauvette*, Editions Verve, 1952, and *The Decisive Moment*, Simon& Schuster, 1952.
- [19](#) 'Ernest Cole's Rediscovered Archive', Magnum Photos (undated).
- [20](#) *King Kong*, based on the life of the South African heavyweight Ezekiel Dlamini, was staged at the University of the Witwatersrand in 1959 and at the Prince's Theatre, London in 1961, the year after the Sharpeville massacre.

8. Binyavanga Wainaina

- [1](#) 'How to Write About Africa', *Granta* 92, 2019.
- [2](#) Interview with Frank Bures, *Tin House*, 2006.
- [3](#) Akin Adeşokan, 'Sembène, Vieyra, and the making of *Xala*', *Film Quarterly* 78 (UCLA), 2024.
- [4](#) 'Discovering Home', *How to Write About Africa*, Hamish Hamilton, 2022.
- [5](#) *Kwani?* 1, June 2023.
- [6](#) Dipo Faloyin, 'The Birth of White Saviour Imagery', *Africa Is Not a Country*, Harvill Secker, 2022.
- [7](#) Nanjala Nyabola, Al Jazeera, 2 January 2014. See also Nyabola, *Digital Democracy, Analogue Politics*, Zed, 2019.
- [8](#) Toussaint Nothias, 'How Western Journalists Actually Write About Africa', *Journalism Studies* 19, 2018.
- [9](#) 'On Kapuściński's "Gonzo Orientalism"', *Mail& Guardian*, 20 March 2007, reprinted in *How to Write About Africa*.
- [10](#) Granta Books, 2011.
- [11](#) 'Binyavanga Wainaina: Rewriting Africa', Al Jazeera, 13 April 2013.
- [12](#) Both 'how to' essays appear in *How to Write About Africa*.
- [13](#) *Bidoun*, Bazaar II, 2010.
- [14](#) 'In Soweto', *Granta* 34, 1990.
- [15](#) 'I Am a Homosexual, Mum: A Lost Chapter from *One Day I Will Write About this Place*', *Africa Is a Country*, 11 July 2020.
- [16](#) Rolling updates on the figures can be found at humandignitytrust.org.
- [17](#) 'Why Kenya's Best-Known Writer Decided to Come Out', *Tell Me More*, National Public Radio, 23 January 2014.
- [18](#) Zethu Matebeni, 'How NOT to Write About Queer South Africa', in Matabeni (ed.), *Reclaiming Afrikan: Queer Perspectives on Gender and Sexual Identities*, Modjaji Books, 2014.
- [19](#) 'It's Only a Matter of Acceleration Now', Chimurenga (Chronic), 1 July 2014.
- [20](#) Akin Adeşokan, 'The Remix', *Everything Is Sampled*, Indiana University Press, 2023.
- [21](#) 'Binyavanga at TEDx: Conversations with Baba', transcript, The Elephant, 30 May 2019, theelephant.info.
- [22](#) Lamine Fonfana, *It's Only a Matter of Acceleration Now*, Trilogy Tapes, 2023.

9. William Kentridge and John Akomfrah

- [1](#) Kentridge's production of *Lulu* premiered at the Dutch National Opera, Amsterdam, in 2015.
- [2](#) William Kentridge and Peter Galison, *The Refusal of Time*, Documenta, 2011.
- [3](#) *William Kentridge: Thick Time*, Whitechapel Gallery, 2016.
- [4](#) Louisiana Channel, 'William Kentridge Interview: How We Make Sense of the World', YouTube, 1 October 2014, available at kentridge.studio.
- [5](#) *Féerie*: a genre of theatre based on picaresque fables, with song, comedy, occasional melodrama, magical transpositions and spectacular staging, whose popularity peaked in the late 1830s during the Restoration.
- [6](#) Matthew Kentridge, *The Soho Chronicles: 10 Films by William Kentridge*, Seagull, 2015.
- [7](#) Seagull, 2021.
- [8](#) For Churchill, Mangin, Stuart Stephens and others: David Olusoga, *The World's War: Forgotten Soldiers of Empire*, Head of Zeus, 2014.
- [9](#) The story of the gunboats is better known than the suffering of the porters who dragged them to their destination in 1915. Such, for Kentridge, was the 'colonial logic' of 'inaudibility and invisibility'. *The Head& the Load* premiered at Tate Modern in July 2018.
- [10](#) By colourising archive materials, Peter Jackson's *They Shall Not Grow Old*, commissioned by the BBC and the Imperial War Museum for the First World War centenary, did precisely this. It was broadcast on 11 November 2018.
- [11](#) *Vertigo Sea*, Smoking Dogs Films, premiered at the 2015 Venice Biennale.
- [12](#) The *Rückenfigur* has been skilfully repurposed not only by Akomfrah but by the Nigerian fashion photographer Lakin Ogunbanwo (b.1987): 'Gallery Talks: Red Hook Labs', *Nataal*, May 2016.
- [13](#) Derek Walcott, 'The Sea is History', *Paris Review* 74, 1978; Heathcote Williams, *Whale Nation*, Jonathan Cape, 1988.
- [14](#) *Arcadia*, Smoking Dogs Films, premiered at the Sharjah Biennial in 2023. *Listening All Night to the Rain* premiered at the Venice Biennale, 2024.
- [15](#) Su Dongpo (Su Shi), translated by Jiann I. Lin and David Young as *Listening All Night to the Rain*, Pinyon Publications, 2020.
- [16](#) Alexander Morrison, 'John Akomfrah: The Filmmaker Exposing the Colonial Adventures of Micro-Organisms and More', *Art Newspaper*, January 2024.

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[Chapter 2](#): Annie E. Coombes, *Reinventing Africa: Museums, Material Culture and Popular Imagination in Late Victorian and Edwardian England*, Yale University Press, 1994. For the power of emblematic statuary, including Lusinga Iwa Ng'ombe's carved likeness: Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, Random House, 1983. On Lusinga and the Émile Storms mission: Allen F. Roberts, *A Dance of Assassins: Performing Early Colonial Hegemony in the Congo*, Indiana University Press, 2012. On the likely reception of artefacts returned to Nigeria: Adéwálé Májà-Pearce, 'Strewn with Loot', *London Review of Books* 43, no. 16, 12 August 2021. On the decolonisation project at Tervuren: Matthias De Groof and Mona Mpembele, *Palimpsest of the Africa Museum*, Cobra Films, 2019. For the downfall of Patrice Lumumba: Susan Williams, *White Malice: The CIA and the Covert Recolonization of Africa*, Hurst, 2021; Stuart A. Reid, *The Lumumba Plot: The Secret History of a Cold War Assassination*, Knopf,

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[Chapter 4](#). On Bertina Lopes, Pancho Guedes, the arts scene in colonial Mozambique and cultural resistance in former Portuguese colonies in Africa: Buala, a multilingual website launched in 2010 by Marta Lança, buala.org. For Malangatana: Júlio Navarro, *Malangatana Valente Ngwenya*, Mkuki na Nyota Publishers, 2003; Hendrik Folkerts, Felicia Mings and Constantine Petridis, 'Works in the Exhibition', *Malangatana: Mozambique Modern – The Modern Series at the Art Institute of Chicago*, Art Institute of Chicago, 2021. For African reappropriations of modernism, Chika Okeke-Agulu, 'Modern African Art', in Okwui Enwezor, *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945–1994*, Prestel, 1999.

[Chapter 5](#). 'The Legacies of Sarah Maldoror (1929–2020): A Roundtable', *Another Gaze*, 13 April 2022. For a detailed account of her most famous film, see the *Sambizanga* issue of *L'Avant Scène Cinéma* 720, February 2025. For the scope and intensity of the anti-colonial culture in which

Maldoror and others were steeped: Hana Morgenstern, Koni Benson and Mahvish Ahmad, *Revolutionary Papers*, ‘an international, transdisciplinary research and teaching initiative on anticolonial, anti-imperial and related left periodicals of the Global South’ (revolutionarypapers.org) and their collaborative series with Africa Is a Country (africasacountry.com). On the PAIGC’s liberation war in Guinea-Bissau and Maldoror’s own work in the country: ‘Cabral Unblocked the Road to Independence, the Task Left to Us Was To Pave It’, transcript of a conversation between Marta Lança and the veteran cinematographer Sana Na N’hada, posted on Buala, March 2025, buala.org; Filipa César, *Spell Reel*, Filmes do Tejo/Spectre Productions, 2017, a highly innovative documentary based on recovered archive from the liberation war and the reaction of Bissau-Guineans at screenings more than forty years after independence, for which Sana Na N’hada joined forces with the director. For a discursive look at Mário Pinto de Andrade’s life and work, Billy Woodberry, *Mário*, Divina Comédia/Subobscura Films, 2024.

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[Chapter 7](#). Daniel Zimble, *Goldblatt*, Goodman Gallery, 2017; *David Goldblatt: The Last Interview*, Steidl, 2019; David Goldblatt, *Ex Offenders at the Scene of Crime: South Africa and England 2008–2016*, Steidl, 2020; Judy Ditner, Leslie Wilson and Matthew Witkovsky, *David Goldblatt: No Ulterior Motive*, Yale University Press, 2023. On *Drum* magazine: John Matshikiza, *The Drum Decade: Stories from the 1950s*, Kwazulu Natal, 2001. For work by Ernest Cole's comrade and rival: Peter Magubane, *June 16: The Fruit of Fear*, Skotaville, 1986; Peter Magubane with Carol Lazar and Nadine Gordimer, *Women of South Africa: Their Fight for Freedom*, Bulfinch, 1993; Raoul Peck, *Ernest Cole: Lost and Found*, Arte France Cinéma/Velvet Films, 2024.

[Chapter 8](#). Billy Kahora, 'On Binyavanga Wainaina's Groundbreaking Work', Literary Hub, 24 May 2019; John Ryle, 'Binyavanga Wainaina 1971–2019', 30 May 2019, johnryle.com; Isaac Otidi Amuke, 'Knowing Binyavanga', The Elephant, 20 December 2019, theelephant.info; Alexis Okeowo, 'How Binyavanga Wainaina Wrote About Africa', *New Yorker*, 30 October 2024. On Walter Rodney and the political debates of the 1970s in Uganda and Tanzania: Mahmood Mamdani, 'The African University', *London Review of Books* 40, no. 14, 19 July 2018.

[Chapter 9](#). William Kentridge, *The Head and the Load*, Prestel, 2020. On Kentridge's sources for *I Am Not Me, the Horse Is Not Mine* (2008): 'The Case of Bukharin', transcripts of the trial of Nikolai Bukharin in March 1938, marxist.org; Nikolai Gogol, *The Nose*, trans. Ronald Wilks, Penguin, 2015; a filmed version of Kentridge's production of *The Nose* (Shostakovich) at the Metropolitan Opera New York, reprised in 2013, is available on Vimeo. For John Akomfrah and Black Audio Film Collective: Coco Fusco, *Young, British and Black*, Hallwalls/Contemporary Arts Centre, Buffalo, 1988. *The Unfinished Conversation*, Smoking Dogs Films, 2012, was purchased by the Tate in 2014. For a catalogue of three key works in the years that followed: *John Akomfrah*, Lisson Gallery, 2016. For an overview of Akomfrah's archive and work in progress: smokingdogsfilms.com and Lisson Gallery.

Listening Booth

I have kept clear of music in this collection – a subject full of pitfalls for a writer with no musical training. But here is a list of tracks to accompany the pieces. A few bear directly on works and artists discussed in this book. Many are songs or instrumentals I was listening to as it came together.

Michel Leiris and the Dakar–Djibouti Expedition:

‘Chant d’accueil pour les étrangers’ (‘Song of Welcome for Strangers’), and
‘Le cri de l’hyène: Akogona’ (‘Hyena Call’), *Musique du Monde: Musique et Chants des Dogon*, Buda Records, 92667-2, 1997.
Dogon AD, Julius Hemphill, Mbari, 1972, Freedom Records, 1977.

Museums:

‘Jubilee Anthem’, the Eleja Choir (Nigeria), *The Secret Museum of Mankind Vol. 1: Ethnic Music Classics (1925–1948)*, Yazoo 7004, 1995.
‘Visions of Johanna’, Bob Dylan, *Blonde on Blonde*, Columbia Records, C2L 41, 1966.

Albert Camus and Kamel Daoud:

‘Fel Mnem’, Reinette L’Oranaise, *Patrimoine Musical*, MLP Music, 01122, 2012.
‘Malou Khouya’, Khaled (aka Cheb Khaled), *Aatouni Walidi*, Oran Phone K37 (cassette), 1983.

Luís Bernardo Honwana and Bertina Lopes:

‘Matilde’, Orchestra Marrabenta Star de Moçambique, *Marrabenta Piquenique*, Piranha Records PIR1043, 1996.
‘Orchestral Timbila of Xipamanine’, Shipamanine Timbila Orchestra, *Music from Mozambique Vol.3*, Folkways Records FWO4319, 1983.
Shipamanine was a wooden xylophone ensemble of sanitation workers in

the suburbs of Maputo. The recording was made at the height of South Africa's destabilisation of Mozambique, which explains the lead dancer's denunciation of P. W. Botha: 'You abuse, Mr Botha ... You are abusing Mozambique.'

Sarah Maldoror:

'Caminho do Mato', Ana Wilson, from the soundtrack of *Sambizanga*, Isabelle Productions, Animatógrafo/New Yorker Films, 1972. The lyrics are from a poem by Agostinho Neto.

Belita Palma's performance of the song is available online from Ntone Edjabe, 'La Discothèque de Sarah Maldoror', *Troubles dans les Collections*, no. 4, 2023.

'Brotherhood at Ketchaoua', Archie Shepp and unnamed North African musicians, *Live at the Pan-African Festival*, BYG Actuel 529.351, 1971. Recorded in Algeria in 1969, a work of instructive chaos.

Seydou Keïta:

'Duga', Rail Band, *Buffet Hôtel de la Gare*, Mississippi Records MRI206, 2024, recorded in the 1970s. The album features two promising young vocalists, Salif Keïta and Mory Kanté. At the time, Rail Band was sponsored (and mostly employed) by Mali's state railway company.

Sanlé Sory:

'Chérie Nawa', Orchestre Volta-Jazz, *Bobo Yéyé: Belle Epoque in Upper Volta*, Numero Group (Chicago), NUM055 and 055B, 2016, reissued in 2022 as a vinyl box set with insert pamphlet. Digital version available on Bandcamp.

David Goldblatt:

'Light Up the Light', Margaret Singana, *Lady Africa*, Jo'Burg Records, TJL 13000, 1973, also available on Bandcamp. In 1970, when Goldblatt took Singana's portrait, she was a singer of generic mid-Atlantic soul for apartheid South Africa. The year after the Soweto uprising, Singana discovered a new, incisive manner with 'Hamba Bekile' (Pass the calabash), on *Tribal Fence*, 1977, Casablanca Records, NBLP 7082 DJ.

Ernest Cole:

‘Dorkay House’, The Blue Notes, *Legacy: Live in South Afrika*, a performance recorded in Durban in 1964, first released by Ogun Records in the UK in 1998, available on Bandcamp.

Binyavanga Wainaina:

‘Friday Feeling’, Chimano, *Heavy is the Crown*, Exodus Records, Kenya, 2022.

William Kentridge:

Felix in Exile, score by Philip Miller, © William Kentridge and Philip Miller, 1994.

‘Stimela’, Hugh Masekela, *Hope*, Triloka Records 7203-4, 1994.

John Akomfrah:

‘I Thought I Heard Buddy Bolden Say’, Jelly Roll Morton, *I Thought I Heard Buddy Bolden Say*, RCA Victor, LPV-559, 1968.

‘Gloomy Sunday’, Paul Robeson, Victor 25362, 78 rpm, 1936.